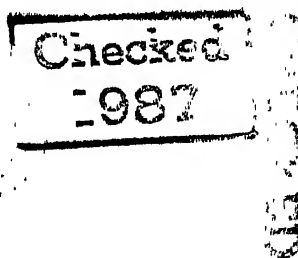


Pushkin

BY

ERNEST J. SIMMONS



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To follow the thoughts of a great man
is a most interesting science.

Pushkin

PREFACE

For the sake of easy reference all dates in this book are reckoned according to the Old Style, that is, according to the Julian calendar. To change a date to the New Style, add eleven days in the eighteenth century and twelve days in the nineteenth century.

Notes which provide necessary information concerning matters in the text are placed at the bottom of the page. All other notes, which are indicated by numerals, have been relegated to the back of the book. In nearly every case these numbered notes refer simply to Russian works which have been mentioned or quoted in the text. They exist for the benefit of those who wish to ascertain the Russian titles or to check translations from the Russian.

I am deeply indebted to Harvard University for grants from the Milton Fund and the Fund for Research in the Humanities. This generosity has enabled me to have direct access to highly important material on Pushkin which has been brought to light in Russia in recent years.

Two eminent Soviet Pushkinists, Professors M. A. Tsyavlovski and B. V. Tomashevski, have kindly aided my researches.

The profound scholarship in the Russian language and literature of Professor Samuel H. Cross, my friend and colleague, has been ever at my service. I am grateful for his assistance.

E. J. S.

Leverett House
Harvard University
January, 1937

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TRANSLITERATION

There is no universally accepted method of transliterating the letters of the Russian alphabet into English. The system used for Russian names and titles mentioned in this book is that employed by the Library of Congress, with a few changes which seem to make for simplicity in English orthography without essentially violating the phonetic value of the Russian letters. However, the spelling of a few proper names, which have become fixed in English by long usage, is retained.

а	a	с	s
б	b	т	t
в	v	у	u
г	g	ф	f
д	d	х	kh
е	e	ц	ts
ж	zh	ч	ch
з	z	ш	sh
и	i	щ	shch
і	i	ъ	(omitted)
й	i (omitted after й)	ы	y
к	k	ь	(omitted)
л	l	ѣ	e
м	m	э	e
н	n	ю	iu
о	o	я	ya
п	p	ѐ	f
р	r		

PUSHKIN

Introduction

Alexander Pushkin, Russia's greatest poet, is little known in Western Europe or America. Compared to those giants of the novel, Turgenev, Dostoevski, and Tolstoi, he is almost a nonentity outside his native land. The comparison of literary artists is hazardous, and the conclusions rarely have any validity in fact or in aesthetics. Yet one may venture to compare Pushkin by way of placing him among his better-known contemporaries. If we except Goethe, it is not an exaggeration to say that during the first forty years of the nineteenth century no poet of Western Europe surpassed Pushkin in sheer genius or in sustained quality of literary accomplishment. For over a hundred years he has been Russia's most beloved poet. His countrymen have continued to read him, as we read Shakespeare, sometimes more and sometimes less, depending upon the intellectual interests of a given generation. But no native poet has ever had such a large and unfailing number of enthusiastic readers. Turgenev and Dostoevski called themselves his pupils; Tolstoi learned his verses by heart and acclaimed his literary significance. The best pages of Russian criticism have been devoted to his poetry, and many profound judgments have been pronounced upon his life and works. Russians in general recognize a perennial charm in Pushkin's poems, a timelessness which evokes as much delight today as it did when he was a living literary hero. In view of these facts it may be illuminating to dwell briefly on the reasons for the relative lack of interest in Pushkin among peoples outside of Russia.

The difficulty of translation, of course, has been a large factor in preventing a correct estimate of Pushkin among non-Russian readers. To render adequately the bare contents of his poetry is simple enough. Although there is a distinct Russian flavor to the substance, in foreign dress it will seem equally worthy to the Englishman, Frenchman, or German. But invariably some

quintessential quality, which for lack of a better word we may call "form," is lost in translation. The form is so significant that failure to reproduce it in a foreign version robs the original of its chief poetic virtue. By form is meant not merely meter, rhyme, and the mechanical ordering of lines, but also phrasemaking and the extraordinarily subtle choice and arrangement of words, a talent which critics recognize as peculiarly Pushkin's own — as "Pushkin's language." Very often this language connotes or suggests much more than any literal rendering can possibly indicate. Form with Pushkin is inseparable from the content and contributes in a high degree to the perfection of a poem. It is never a kind of shell, but the very essence of poetic expression. He will prune and polish until he has achieved the ultimate degree of simplicity. But when a translator attempts to catch this simplicity, the results are often simple in the worst sense of the word. No doubt Pushkin could be translated adequately, but it would take another Pushkin to preserve all the harmonious effects of the original.

A second difficulty which foreigners meet in Pushkin's works is that they seem quite alien to the customary Western European and American conception of Russian culture. This is not entirely the fault of foreigners, for in some respects Pushkin appears to have little in common with the ideals and objectives of the Russian culture and literature which developed after his death. The country's great novelists have been largely responsible for the widespread notion of this culture which is shared by many foreigners today. We have been taught to expect a preaching tendency in Russian literature, a justification of moral good in the world and the unmasking of moral evil. In the works of Turgenev, Dostoevski, Tolstoi, and their followers we find a social-humanitarian teaching which makes for a weak, oppressive, but sincere democratization. This literature has also revealed to us an instinctive and conscious antipathy to accepted government and its inevitable attributes — force and judicial oppression. And there is often expressed an ideological enmity towards Western Europe and its whole political and social structure. Finally, we perceive a neglect of external form

in the name of significant content, and a cult of simplicity and unpleasantness.

Now Pushkin's literary attitude is diametrically opposed to these forces in Russian culture. One must not search for a moral in his works; his muse is truly on the side of both good and evil. There is no tendentiousness, no social teaching, no moral pathos. Although a sincere patriot, he was never a Slavophile, for intellectually he felt as much at home in the culture of Europe as in that of his own country. He opposed evil, but he never preached a crusade against it. In him there is nothing of Christian humility, mysticism, or nihilism. The brotherhood of man would have appealed to Pushkin, if he had thought about it at all, as an excellent subject for a satiric poem. As for purpose in art — he summed it all up in one phrase: the purpose of poetry is poetry.

Such a Russian and such a poet may well confuse the foreigner's conception of Russian literature and culture. Pushkin had followers, but, like Shakespeare, he had no real continuators. He stands a solitary figure, and his poetry, like Chaucer's, is in a sense the glittering capstone of the past. However, this is not the whole story. To change the figure, the stream of Russian culture was not sharply divided by Pushkin; it simply flowed into a different channel. But even here the discerning critic can detect the precious life-stream of Pushkin. Despite political and economic change, national catastrophes, and social upheavals, he has left his mark on Russian culture, and few of the succeeding great writers have escaped his influence. His true position in Russian literature is that of a preserver of the past and a prophet of the future.

Any biographical study of Pushkin has its own meaning and value. He was great not only as a poet but as a man. And as a man it is difficult to find in the whole range of Russian literature anyone who was as vital, brilliant, and unfortunate as Pushkin. He felt life deeply, and he gave to it all his passion, all his genius. He approached it directly and fearlessly, yet he found it no unmixed blessing. Life beat him down, persecuted him, and rarely cheered him with moments of happiness. It is

not necessary to idealize him. He knew both weakness and greatness, but his genius towered triumphantly above everything that was small and mean in his nature. He lived in a difficult time, difficult for him as for any man, during the reigns of Alexander I and Nicholas I. He belonged to a definite historical epoch, conditioned by well-defined cultural, social, economic, and political forces. And his life and poetry were so intimately involved in all these forces that to ignore them would result in a most distorted picture. A biographer must study Pushkin as a man, as a poet, and as an historical figure.

CHAPTER I

"Russian Scribblers Call Me an Aristocrat"

"So you have become an aristocrat," a poet-friend wrote to Pushkin in 1825. "This makes me laugh. Are you proud of your five-hundred-year-old nobility? I see in this a piddling imitation of Byron. For God's sake, be Pushkin! You are a clever enough fellow in your own right." ¹

Ryleev, the poet-friend, had touched Pushkin on a sensitive spot. Aristocrats do not boast of their pedigrees. The romance of genealogy is the darling foible of the middle classes. Pushkin felt obliged to explain himself — and, incidentally, to correct Ryleev.

"You are angry," he replied, "that I praise my six-hundred-year-old nobility. (N.B., my nobility is older.) Why do you not see that the spirit of our literature depends in part on the status of our writers? We cannot offer our works to a lord, for by our own birth we esteem ourselves his equal. . . ." ²

The pride of birth went deeper than this shuffling explanation implies. Unlike Dr. Johnson, Pushkin never had to wait for favor in an outward room; nor was he ever repulsed from the door of a noble lord. If he wished for a patron, he had one in the Tsar of All the Russias. Pushkin insisted upon his aristocracy because the title of "poet" was held in contempt by the new nobility and uncultured bureaucracy. He knew his worth and had divined his immortality. Before the snobbism of crass officialdom he flaunted his six-hundred-year-old pedigree. "A lack of esteem for one's ancestors," he defended, "is the first sign of wildness and immorality." It was also comforting to think that his name was writ large in the annals of Russian history, and that he was a living force carrying on the ancient glory of his race.

Not a little of the tragedy of Pushkin's life, however, is im-

placit in this arrogance of ancestry. Like a falcon towering in his pride of place, he was capable of circling scornfully above condescending courtiers and venomous critics. But too often he met them on their own level. They sneered at his ancestry, dubbed him a mere "writer," and provoked all the fierce resentment of his nature.

A shaping Divinity somehow or other never provided Pushkin with those blessed tokens of aristocracy — small ears and white hands — which so fortified Byron's family conceit. But the line of his ancestry went back as far as Byron's, and was certainly more distinguished in that kind of historical fame which noble families cherish.

There is often little justification for the biographer's zeal in digging away at the roots of the family tree, but in Pushkin's case extenuation is not lacking. He was proud of his ancestors, though he never tried to conceal their various faults and crimes. They were links connecting him with his country's past, and in many ways they helped to foster in him a love for Russian history which he expressed in memoirs, scientific works, historical romances, dramatic productions, and many poems. This interest developed his knowledge of the historical process, which provided an effective counterbalance to his flair for political freethinking and revolutionary ideas. Finally, this six-hundred-year-old ancestry was strangely involved in his emotional and intellectual reactions to the society in which he lived.

II

I am a descendant of old boyars.
My Genealogy

The Pushkins were a numerous clan. They claimed descent — as did many other noble Russian families — from Radsha, a half-legendary, half-historical Prussian who entered the country in the second half of the thirteenth century to serve the sainted Great Prince Alexander Nevski. Like Ivan the Terrible, then, and perhaps with more right, the Pushkins could lay claim to Teutonic origin. Radsha was described in the chronicles as an "honorable man"; that is, explained Pushkin, "an illustrious

or noble man.”³ At the beginning of the fifteenth century Grigori, a descendant of Radsha, was the first to bear the family name “Pushka.” And from Konstantin, Grigori’s youngest son, Pushkin descended in a straight line.

The Pushkins had a right to the hereditary title of “boyar,” which originally belonged only to the highest officials of the state. Their name was included in the famous Pedigree Book of Ivan the Terrible among those of the most noble families of Russia. Members of the clan played important parts in the affairs of the realm, especially in the seventeenth century. They served on the council, as court officials, governors of provinces, and ambassadors, always close to the Muscovite Great Princes and to the tsars. Pushkin himself singled out for special praise Grigori Gavrilovich as “one of the most remarkable figures in the epoch of the Pretender.”⁴ For his part in the conspiracy Grigori was rewarded with a place close to the False Dmitri when the latter ascended the throne. Pushkin put Grigori’s father, Gavrila, *con amore*, into his play, *Boris Godunov*. “I portrayed him,” he proudly remarked, “exactly as I found him in history and in my family papers.”⁵ Nor did the poet fail to point out that no less than four Pushkins (actually five) signed the Act of Election which placed the first of the Romanovs on the throne, a service which Nicholas I hardly regarded as a family debt to his troublesome poet. Down through the reign of Peter the Great the Pushkins continued to play a significant role in governmental matters, and one of them the great tsar executed for his “significance” in the Streltsy conspiracy. In the eighteenth century, however, new stock, coming from obscure provincial gentry, pushed the descendants of the old boyars into the background. The Pushkins were among those families that lost their luster and importance.

But blots in the scutcheon were not rare on the male, as well as on the female, side of the family tree. Unhappy and sometimes tragic marriages dogged the fortunes of Pushkin’s ancestors and gave the poet unpleasant food for thought on the eve of his own marriage. His great-grandfather, Alexander Petrovich Pushkin, murdered his young wife in a fit of jealousy

or madness. And his grandfather, Lev Aleksandrovich, Pushkin described as a "passionate and cruel man."⁶ He did not hesitate to repeat a story that his grandfather's first wife died in a domestic prison where she had been confined by her husband because he suspected her of a real or imaginary affair with the French tutor of their son. In good Russian feudal fashion the grandfather hanged this presumptuous pedagogue to the gates of his estate. Nor did his second wife fare much better. Though in agony, she did not dare, on one occasion, to refuse her husband's demand that she accompany him on a visit. On the road, said Pushkin, she gave birth to a child. It is interesting that years later (1840), after the poet's death, Pushkin's father took pains to deny these stories, and gave his own father a clean bill of health.⁷

By his second marriage Lev Aleksandrovich had two daughters and two sons. The elder of the sons was Vasili Lvovich, born in 1767. This uncle of Pushkin's became a well-known poet and the literary guide of his more famous nephew. He carried on the unhappy-marriage tradition of the Pushkins, for his wife, a great beauty, deserted him for another, curiously justifying herself by charging Vasili with unfaithfulness.

Sergei Lvovich, the second son and the poet's father, was born on May 23, 1770. Like his elder brother, he received a typical worldly, French education, and followed the fashion of many young members of noble families at that time by entering the army. He became an ensign in the Egerski regiment and retired with the rank of major in 1798. Two years before his retirement he married "a beautiful creole," Nadezhda Osipovna Hannibal, who was then living with her mother in Petersburg. Their second child was Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin.

III

But I, a rake on pleasure bent,
Ugly offspring of negro descent . . .
To Iurev

With amusing abandon, critics allow their imaginations to run wild on the fetching question of the negro blood which Push-

kin inherited from his mother. Few traits of his life or poetry have failed, at one time or another, to be subjected to the argument ethnological. A rare flamboyancy in imagery and an unfailing sense of poetic rhythm must reflect the Negro in him. Or, his nature is passionate — again a positive indication of hot African blood. If on occasions he grows insanely jealous, affects garish clothes, or changes swiftly in mood from deep melancholy to childlike gaiety, then these traits, too, become the indubitable stamp and seal of the blackamoor. Nor is there lacking that chauvinistic type of biographer who attributes all the faults of Pushkin's nature to his negro strain and all the virtues to his pure Russian ancestry. More pardonable, perhaps, but none the less biased, are those American Negroes who claim Pushkin for their own and see in his genius a glorious expression of his ultimate African origin.

Here we are obviously treading on dangerous ground. The riddle of genius defies solution, and particularly the solution of race. A passionate or jealous nature, fluctuating moods, and a love for ostentatious clothes are traits that might appear among any of the sons of Ham, Shem, or Japheth. Heredity is a fascinating subject, but the unknown factors in any line of descent make the derivation of human characteristics a mere guessing game. Browning's creole grandmother may explain a certain mental gaudiness in the man, but he could, when the spirit moved him, be as plain and severe as an Eskimo. Clearly to understand cause and effect in Pushkin's nature on the basis of heredity would require a thorough knowledge of much more than the negro blood in his mixed ancestry. And the effort, no doubt, would be as fruitless as trying to run down the source of the maze of cracks in some ancient Byzantine mosaic. Indeed, it would be profitable to dismiss here and now the whole muddled question of negro blood. But Pushkin himself prevents this. If he had written his own biography, he would have devoted considerable space to the subject. For unlike Browning or Alexandre Dumas, Pushkin took his African ancestry very seriously. On more than one occasion he referred poignantly to his negro descent. He thought and dreamt about the black

founder of his family in Russia, traced his physical appearance to him, and felt that this strain of African blood gave him a unique position in society. In short, Pushkin's so-called negro ancestry had a deep psychological influence on him, and for this reason, at least, it is necessary to state the facts in the case.

It is not a matter of ethnological hairsplitting to say that Pushkin's great-grandfather on his mother's side, Abram Petrovich Hannibal, was an Abyssinian and not a Negro. In derision the Arabs applied the term "Abyssinian," which means "mixed," to the inhabitants of Ethiopia, a fact which truly indicates their polyglot nature. History flung into this melting pot Beja, Somalis, Arabs, Turks, Hebrews, Portuguese, Negroes, and other peoples. The fairest description of the population of Abyssinia is that it is largely of Hamitic and Semitic base, with a negro admixture. That is, the Abyssinians belong fundamentally to the Caucasian division of races. How much or how little of negro blood coursed through the veins of Abram Petrovich no one can pretend to say. All we know is that he passed on to his descendants in Russia certain physical characteristics, such as a dark skin, full, thick lips, and a somewhat broad but not negroid nose. However, these characteristics did not make Pushkin a Negro any more than the other possible strains in the mixed blood of Abram Petrovich made the poet a Hebrew or an Arab or a Somali.

The maternal great-grandfather of Pushkin was born in northern Abyssinia in 1697 or 1698. His father was a sovereign prince, but in the position of a vassal to the Turks, who from the early sixteenth century had made frequent incursions into the country. When he was eight years old Abram was sent to Constantinople, with other youths of noble Abyssinian families, as a hostage. There he lived in the sultan's seraglio for a year.

At that time Peter the Great was on the throne of Russia. This extraordinary and quixotic monarch had a passion for all manner of bizarre specimens of humanity, among which he included dwarfs and Negroes. He surrounded himself with strange or monstrous creatures, much as the medieval rulers of Europe kept at their courts simpletons and jesters. And the

great nobles of Russia imitated this practice. Even as late as Pushkin's childhood it was not uncommon for a powerful noble to include dwarfs and Negroes in his entourage.

The story goes that Peter wrote to his envoy at Constantinople to procure several bright negro boys. With some difficulty the envoy complied — it is said by bribing the sultan's vizier — and in 1706 Abram was taken from the seraglio and brought to Russia. In an old German biography of Abram, found among Pushkin's papers, we are told that he always insisted that he came to Russia of his own free will; and Pushkin himself scornfully denied the allegation of a literary enemy that his great-grandfather was bought by Peter the Great for a bottle of rum. Another and more gratuitous explanation has been offered for Abram's journey to Russia. The tsar's subjects bitterly opposed his educational reforms. Accordingly, Peter wished to prove to them, in the person of the little dark Abyssinian, that even members of another race would take kindly to his educational schemes and benefit therefrom. The course of schooling to which young Abram was subjected almost lends credence to this dubious explanation.

The tsar quickly made a favorite of the boy, and in 1707 he was christened at Vilna in the Orthodox Church, with Peter and the queen of Poland for godparents. He preferred to use his own given name instead of the tsar's, which he employed simply as a patronymic. Many years later Abram Petrovich added the family name "Hannibal," why and on what authority it has never been determined. It is said that Peter gave him the name because of its African associations; and in the German biography it was good-naturedly argued that Abram was descended directly from the great Carthaginian Hannibal.

In 1717 Peter sent his fosterling to Paris to be educated in engineering and the mathematical sciences. He took part in the War of the Spanish Succession, acquired a veneer of French culture, and returned to Russia in 1723. On his deathbed Peter made provision for him, and Abram was given an engineering post in the army and became teacher of mathematics to the heir apparent. In the course of the next few years, however, he

was persecuted by the ruling favorite, Menshikov. On various pretexts he was sent further and further into Siberia to undertake petty engineering tasks, and on one occasion his arrest was ordered. Only under the Empress Anna Ivanovna did his star once again begin to rise.

In 1731 Abram married a Greek girl and soon began to contribute his share to the marital difficulties that accumulated on both sides of Pushkin's family. His wife hated him as a "Negro not of our kind," and seems to have been unfaithful to him. A "white baby" said to have been born to her gave rise to the motive of infidelity which Pushkin intended to use in the unfinished historical romance, *The Negro of Peter the Great*, which he wrote about his great-grandfather. Abram applied domestic correction in the form of stringing up his wife to a ring in the wall and beating her unmercifully. Then he had her confined to a civil hospital for five years, which gave the unhappy husband leisure enough to fall in love with another woman, Khristina Sheberkha, a Livonian. Abram lived with her for some time, and they finally married in 1736. His bigamous position was eventually terminated many years later in an ecclesiastical trial. The first wife was judged guilty and shut up in a convent, and after Abram had performed a slight act of penance, the second marriage was declared legal.

During the reign of Elizabeth the list of Abram Petrovich's engineering feats and of the ranks and rewards he received makes an imposing picture of activity and success. He became a highly important figure in government and army circles, and the empress, shortly before her death, conferred on him the title of general in chief and the order of St. Alexander Nevski. He lived well on into the reign of Catherine II, dying in 1781 surrounded with honors and wealth.

Abram Petrovich had no children by his first wife, but the second marriage was blessed with eleven, of whom nine survived, five sons and four daughters. One of the sons, Ivan Abramovich, achieved almost as much fame as his illustrious father, and Pushkin celebrated in verse his victory at Navarino in 1773, where he was admiral of the fleet. He was also noted as

the builder of the fortress of Kherson, and rose to a position of influence and to the rank of major general.

The other sons did nothing of consequence, although two of them succeeded in adding material to the history of unhappy marriages among the Hannibals. One of these, Osip Abramovich, was Pushkin's grandfather. He was born in 1744 and served in the artillery, where he achieved the rank of major. In 1773 he married, curiously enough, Marya Alekseevna Pushkina, a collateral descendant of the medieval Radsha. Nadezhda Osipovna, the only surviving child of this marriage, was Pushkin's mother. The poet wrote: "The African character of my grandfather, and his flaming passions, united with a terrible levity, involved him in amazing mistakes."⁸ Pushkin put it lightly. The jealousy of the wife and the inconstancy of the husband soon brought about a separation. Then Osip conveniently forgot about Marya Alekseevna and married a rich widow, representing himself as a recently bereaved husband. Their felicity, however, did not last long. His first wife soon discovered the "mistake," and an interminably long court case ensued in which poor Osip was torn between the demands of both women. Rusticated by command of Catherine II and forced to remit to Marya Alekseevna a fourth part of his estate, he died while his second wife was still trying to recover money she had signed over to him. Marya Alekseevna Hannibal brought up her daughter in the little village of Kobrino surrendered by her husband. Theirs was an isolated existence, often made unhappy by straitened circumstances. There is much reason to suppose that Marya Alekseevna petted and spoiled her only child. Kobrino was near Petersburg, and when Nadezhda reached marriageable age her mother frequently took her to the capital. Their hopes were eventually realized, for the girl soon met and married a young officer, Sergei Lvovich Pushkin. Nadezhda compensated him for her extremely meager dowry by an unusually attractive figure and a handsome swarthy face.

It is clear, then, that Pushkin on his father's side had a plain title to an old and honored nobility, whose members had at one

time occupied positions high in the government and even close to the throne. From the Hannibals also he could justly claim descent from a noble strain, for the founder of the family in Russia was the son of an "Abyssinian prince." But it is equally clear that at the time of the poet's birth both branches of his family had lost their high official standing, along with much of their wealth. As in the case of many other ancient Russian families, the Pushkins over the centuries had gradually slipped into a respected but undistinguished class of middle nobility.

CHAPTER II

Childhood

O Moscow . . . for a Russian heart
How much is mingled in that sound!
Eugene Onegin

The young couple did not remain long in Petersburg. A year after their marriage (1797) Nadezhda gave birth to a daughter, Olga. In the following year her husband, with a grand gesture, retired from the army to live on his dwindling income. Perhaps the rigorous Prussian discipline which Paul I enforced among his troops bored the lackadaisical Sergei Lvovich. He was a poor officer, always forgetting his gloves or committing some breach of strict army etiquette. Besides, it was the fashion for young men to resign after a reasonable period of service. But life in Petersburg was expensive. Opportunely, grandmother Marya Alekseevna sold her village of Kobrino, and in 1799 the whole family packed off to Moscow.

At the end of the eighteenth century Moscow was like a huge village, dotted here and there with imposing estates of rich noblemen and the golden cupolas of many churches. Most of the houses were little more than miserable peasant huts. The busy center of the present city was then a vast swamp, and ducks and geese swam in stagnant pools of water by the roadside. It was a city of showy luxury and dire poverty, and this contrast in extremes was everywhere noticeable. Here one found a strange mixture of ancient and recent architecture, of European and Eastern manners and customs, of ignorance and culture, of sophistication and barbarism. On the street one encountered every variety of European mingling with Greeks, Turks, and Tatars in their native costumes. Moscow was a capital without a court and lived its own independent life, an existence quite different from that of Petersburg. Petersburg was a stage but in Moscow were the spectators, as one Russian

author defined the difference. For the older city was thronged with superannuated generals and government officials, members of the highest nobility or of no nobility at all, and poor and wealthy landowners from the provinces seeking official favors, rich brides, or the varied pleasures of Mother Moscow.

In this half-Asiatic, half-European city the Pushkins arrived, much, one likes to think, as the Larins did in *Eugene Onegin* — their carts loaded to the spilling point with furniture, mattresses, pots and pans, jars of preserves, and bird cages. In those days people were obliged to travel with all the comforts of home. The couple took a house on German Street in what was at that time a rather fashionable section of the city. There Pushkin was born on May 26, 1799. It was Holy Thursday, and the church bells rang the whole day. He was christened Alexander, no doubt after his great-grandfather Alexander Petrovich, not a hopeful augury, to be sure, for this was the same Pushkin who had murdered his wife. Adoring posterity has placed a marble tablet on a house in German Street to mark the place of birth of the great poet. But exacting scholars are now agreed that the tablet is on the wrong house.

The future poet's father and mother were in some respects ideally mated, for they shared the same weaknesses and each was an effective counter-irritant to the other. There was a touch of the Micawber about Sergei Lvovich. He had a genius for getting into debt and an illusion of grandeur that was well supported by a hypocritical trust in God and a measure of self-pity altogether offensive. After he had resigned from his regiment, circumstances again forced him to enter government service, in which he rose to be the chief of the commissariat commission of the reserve army. But in 1817 he once again took up a life of complete leisure, for which his talents, as well as his inclinations, admirably suited him. He belonged, as one critic has said, to that class of people called "loafers."

Since the reign of Catherine II, Gallomania had been all the rage in Russia, and Sergei Lvovich followed the fashion. He was devoted to French culture in every form, and his command of the language was perfect. Molière, he was credited with know-

ing by heart, and he possessed a facile ability at composing French verses which he indulged frequently. In fact, nature had created Sergei Lvovich to shine in society. He possessed all the address and ornament of the *salon* lion, and it was in the *salon* that he spent most of his time. For him a public was as necessary as for an actor. No one punned or versified better than Sergei Lvovich, and his efforts in this direction went the rounds of the town. No one declaimed poetry better or wrote and staged better amateur plays. He busied himself with everything but work, was concerned with everybody else's affairs but his own and those of his family. Like most social successes he was a colossal lump of egotism. The cheerful appearance and kind nature he presented to the world would degenerate into irascibility or maudlin sentimentality the moment he was faced with the cold realities of life. He was always in debt, mismanaged his estate, and was continually swindled by his peasants. All the business of the household he left to his wife, who was as poorly fitted for the task as her husband. With such a nature it is easy to see why Sergei Lvovich was utterly incapable of understanding his talented son. The failure was unfortunate, and the consequences most unhappy for both.

Like her husband, whom she thoroughly dominated, Nadezhda Osipovna lived in society. She loved theaters, receptions, and balls, and her gay French conversation and vivacious manner made her a general favorite in the *salon*. People liked to think that the irritable, stubborn, and capricious nature of Nadezhda Osipovna, as well as her dark-skinned beauty, was a positive trait of her Abyssinian grandfather. But it would be difficult to draw upon heredity for her love of power, general impracticality, and the conspicuous neglect with which she treated her children. She was capable of sulking for days and months, and on one occasion it is recorded that she refused to talk to little Sasha (Alexander) for a whole year because of some petty grievance. The children, indeed, feared her much more than their father. She had a passion for moving, which the Pushkins did with monotonous regularity, and when she was unable to

change quarters, she sublimated her desires by shifting the furniture around or by transforming the study into the parlor or the dining room into a bedroom.

The Pushkins' door was never closed to visitors, and the household was invariably in a state of chaos. Nadezhda Osipovna was as charming as her husband in the matter of entertainment, and just as irresponsible in the business of running a house. It followed almost as a matter of course that their children — a third child, Lev, was born in 1805 — would be neglected. The father had little time for them, and the mother was capricious in her affection. At one moment she was all kindness, and at the next she would fly into a rage over some slight act of childish disobedience. In these fits of anger she was capable of slapping her grown daughter's face at a public ball.

It soon became apparent to everybody that little Sasha was the ugly duckling in this family. As a small boy he was unattractive, fat, and awkward in his movements, and his dark, coarse features betrayed his Abyssinian blood. Large, lively blue eyes, however, suggested a forming spirit and intelligence. He was moody and timid, shy in the presence of grown-ups, and preferred his own devices to the company and the games of playmates. Whether or not he deserved it, he was soon regarded as a difficult problem by his unsympathetic parents. His mother wanted him to be sociable, and introduced him into the drawing room. But he ran off at the first opportunity. She took him out for a walk. He lagged behind and finally sat down in the middle of the street. Neighbors in the windows smiled at him. He got up and said petulantly, "Well, you don't have to grin!"¹ and ran home in anger. It seems that when he was still an infant Pushkin was taken to Petersburg, for he tells a family story of an encounter there with Paul I in the city gardens. The mad tsar scolded the nurse for not taking off the child's bonnet at his majesty's approach. And the tsar proceeded to remedy the matter by removing the bonnet himself.

Nadezhda Osipovna invented punishments to cure Sasha of his awkwardness and bad habits. Visitors would come and find him in a corner of the hall surrounded by chairs, condemned

to sit there for some prank or other. His mother was particularly offended by his habit of rubbing the palms of his hands together and of everlastingly losing his handkerchiefs. To cure the first offense she tied his hands behind his back for a whole day and deprived him of food. For the second crime he was punished in a more ingenious fashion. She ordered a handkerchief sewed to his jacket, in the manner of a shoulder-knot, which was changed twice a week. Much to the boy's mortification, she compelled him to show himself to guests with the tell-tale handkerchief in place. His awkwardness at children's dances also irritated her. Comrades laughed at him, and, blushing angrily, he would retire to a chair, pout, and refuse to be drawn from his corner. Nadezhda Osipovna's patience with her ugly duckling soon wore out. Besides, like her husband, she had other more interesting things to do than bother with a moody, recalcitrant child. Her indifference turned to coldness, and when the maternal spirit moved her she lavished her affection on Olga and Lev, who were, and always remained, the favorites, especially the younger brother. Sasha became the unloved child of the household and was soon left to himself, a position which he seemed to prefer.

Fortunately, little Sasha's friendless state was not without its consolations. Vexed to tears by the nagging of his mother, he often ran out of the room and hid himself in the large clothes basket of Marya Alekseevna. From this safe retreat he would silently watch his good, kind grandmother go about her work. Marya Alekseevna lived with the Pushkins and was a steadying influence in the disordered ménage. She was wise with the wisdom of years, and the misfortunes of her own troubled existence had filled her with sympathy for the unhappy. She brought comfort and understanding to her neglected grandson. Although she often worried over his intractable nature and fluctuating moods, she did not attempt to punish him. In a sense, she was his first Russian teacher. French was the language of the household, but from his grandmother Sasha heard absorbing tales about his ancestors in strong, simple Russian. His literary friend at school, Delvig, went into raptures over the

pure Russian style of the letters which Marya Alekseevna sent to her grandson.

Perhaps a greater comfort to Sasha in his childhood, and even later when he had grown to manhood, was his old nurse, Arina Rodionovna, whose name he glorified in poetry. She was a freed serf, devoted to the family, and the general nurse of all the Pushkin children. Arina occupied a special position in the household, ate at the same table with her master, and expressed her opinion with the fearlessness of a privileged domestic. She belonged to a familiar type of house serf whose earthy wisdom, severe virtues, and unfailing loyalty were a bulwark against a variety of disintegrating influences common among Russian noble families of the time. She performed the most menial tasks with a simple dignity. And in her sturdy nature she united goodness with querulousness and infinite patience with a pretended severity. She was the guiding genius of the children, but clumsy little Sasha was her favorite, perhaps for the obvious reason that he was nobody else's. Little wonder that he called her "mama," for he found in her a loving tenderness which his own mother failed to give.

Those evenings when his parents went off to a ball or *soirée* were memorable for Sasha. Then he was left alone with his beloved nurse and could expect a story-telling hour. Like many old peasant women, Arina's strong memory was stocked with fascinating tales drawn from the rich storehouse of Russian folklore. Years afterwards Pushkin recalled with pleasure those "golden moments," the transition from prose to poetry, from waking to sleeping, as he eagerly waited for these stories. The old woman entered the room in her nightcap and frayed dressing gown. She bent over the crib, her lively eyes peering down at him through large spectacles. After blessing her nursling, she began in a tense whisper to tell her tales of ghosts and witches, and of the romantic exploits of Bova Korolevich. Sasha's childish imagination grew more and more excited. He crouched fearfully under the bedclothes, scarcely daring to move, to breathe. At last he dropped off to sleep and had marvelous dreams of magicians and ogres, of strange lands and miraculous

transformations of beautiful princesses into majestic white swans.²

Pushkin was always able to look back on these "secret nights" and wondrous dreams with undiminished delight. They were among the few happy recollections of his childhood. Arina Rodionovna awoke and fostered in him a love for the folklore of his native land which was to inspire some of his greatest poems. He never ceased to treasure her memory. Pushkin's father and mother are not once mentioned in his poetry, but to Arina Rodionovna he dedicated many lines, remembering her affectionately as his "ancient little dove,"³ "the kind friend of my wretched youth."⁴ And as Tatyana's nurse in *Eugene Onegin* he immortalized her for posterity.

II

... not one of my tutors could cope
with such an insufferable boy.
A Russian Pelham

About 1806, grandmother Marya Alekseevna bought the village of Zakharovo, a short distance from Moscow. Here the Pushkins spent their summers, for then, as now, all Moscovites who could afford it abandoned the city during the hot months. The estate consisted of a ramshackle old house surrounded by fir trees and peasant huts. But the peasants were a jolly lot, and sang country songs and danced. These visits were a joyful period for young Sasha. Indeed, a remarkable change, or perhaps development, in his nature took place at about this time. Like the male-Cinderella of folk tales, he suddenly came to life and revealed characteristics which were to stick by him. From a quiet, phlegmatic, and uninterested child he was transformed into a lively youngster, swift of movement, and filled with an impish propensity to play all manner of pranks. His apathetic parents were startled and then horrified by this abrupt change — a change all for the worse, they thought. They admonished and scolded, and finally tried a variety of severe corrections. But kindness or severity were now all to no purpose. The seed of rebellion had taken root in the child and was to grow with the

years. They set him down as undutiful and incorrigible, and with these amenities they again left him in peace, content to place their parental aspirations in Lev and Olga. Sasha had already begun his fight for freedom. Personal freedom was one of the conditions of existence which Pushkin valued most in his lifetime. Yet he was condemned, to the very day of his death, to pursue it like a will-o'-the-wisp.

In the country surroundings of Zakharovo Sasha felt free. He loved the woods and the little pond near the house. As a boy, Coleridge, imagining himself one of the Seven Champions of Christendom, used to roam the fields, cutting down weeds and nettles with his stick. And like Coleridge, young Pushkin, driven in upon himself, lived in a fanciful world, the fairy world of Arina Rodionovna's tales. He, too, wandered the fields, beheading the flowers with his cane as he pictured himself a doughty *bogatyr*, a Russian knight. In one of his school-boy poems he remembered these carefree days in the village of Zakharovo with evident delight.

In a youthful and fragmentary *Program for Memoirs* Pushkin jotted down: "First annoyances — governesses." Further on, under the caption, "My disagreeable recollections," he lists his tutors, and significantly adds, "An insupportable situation!"⁵

Throughout his life Pushkin remained interested in Russian education, and on more than one occasion he expressed himself in no uncertain terms on the subject. His own childhood experiences left a bad taste in his mouth and undoubtedly influenced his mature judgment. It was inconvenient for his parents, and also unfashionable, to bother much with little Sasha's schooling. They preferred, like many modern parents, to shift the burden. Sasha was turned over to the tender mercies of foreign tutors, and he wore out several before they gave him up.

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the wave of migration consequent upon the French Revolution literally changed the whole conception of elementary education in Russia. Hundreds of Frenchmen, from titled gentlemen to forthright adventurers,

poor soldiers, lackeys, cooks, and unhappy tradesmen, flocked into the country. France and French culture were held in high esteem. What could be better than to have these *émigrés* impart their culture to Russian youths? Soon every family that could afford it engaged one or several French tutors. It became a fashion indiscriminately indulged in. Abuses were many. Any foreigner inevitably possessed a prescriptive right to pedagogy. There is the story of the Finn who for years taught his own language for French. And in the satirical literature of the time the French tutor became the accepted butt of witty journalists and dramatists.

The Pushkins, of course, subscribed to the vogue, and little Sasha's first instructors were drawn from this *émigré* class. The earliest seems to have been a certain Count de Montfort, a capable man of some education, with a talent for painting and music. But he was soon followed by M. Rousselot, who fancied himself a second Racine and was for one reason or another cordially hated by young Pushkin. He gave way to M. Chédel, another *émigré*, about whose efforts we know nothing except that he spent most of his time in playing cards with the servants, for which offense he was finally dismissed. In an unfinished prose romance, *A Russian Pelham*, Pushkin has left an account of his hero's tutors which has an autobiographical savor. He writes: "Father, of course, loved but did not at all trouble himself about me and left me to the solicitude of Frenchmen who were continually being taken on and discharged. My first tutor turned out to be a drunkard; the second, not a stupid man and not without information, had such mad habits that once he almost murdered me because I spilled ink on his waistcoat; a third, living with us for a whole year, became insane. . . . However, it is true that there was not one of them whom, in two weeks after his introduction to the position, I did not turn into a family joke." ⁶ Whatever their abilities may have been, there is no doubt that Pushkin's instructors quickly found in their charge a young Tatar.

In general, little Sasha's education went slowly. He was clever and eager, but he studied badly and had periods of pro-

tracted laziness. He was taught Russian and arithmetic, and learned theology from a Russian priest. From his sister's governess, Miss Bailey, he acquired a smattering of English; and a German governess effectually prevented him from learning that language because she preferred to talk in Russian. The four rules of arithmetic vexed him to tears. He placed his whole trust in his memory and would repeat the examination answers well, after listening to his sister's recitation. But if by chance he was examined first, he quickly became inarticulate.

It is easy to believe that as a child Pushkin was anything but a model student, and his attitude during his later schooling was hardly an improvement. Yet one has more than a suspicion that his childhood tutors and governesses were largely to blame. Pushkin certainly thought so himself, for he never forgot the unfavorable impression they made on him. Many years later Nicholas I suggested that he write something on education in Russia. Pushkin was quick to seize the opportunity to work off the ancient grudge he bore the system to which he had been subjected as a child. The tsar was not pleased with his effort, feeling that he did not give an important enough place in his treatise to the moral responsibility involved in education. His early experiences are clearly reflected in the following statement: "In Russia domestic education is most inadequate and most immoral: the child, surrounded by servants, sees certain odious examples, becomes self-willed or servile, does not receive any knowledge about justice, the mutual relations of people, or sincere honor. His education is limited to the study of two or three foreign languages and the elementary basis of all science, taught by any hired teacher whatever." 7

III

Unseen, my genius
Hovers over me.
The Town

There were compensations in this domestic education, however, that did much to shape and inform the bright young mind of Sasha. The Pushkins knew everybody in Moscow, and

among their friends were most of the literary celebrities of the town. Sergei Lvovich had a well-known weakness for authors, and he possessed some of those qualities of the brilliant *salon* mistress which are so successful in attracting literary people. He amused without boring, flattered without offending, was humble in the matter of his own talent, and lavished the necessary hospitality on his guests. It is little wonder that cultured foreigners with high-sounding titles, or none at all, and many of the foremost Russian writers found it congenial to make his home a kind of literary center.

His own brother, Vasili Lvovich, was a general favorite of this group. He was a talented versifier, and a light, obscene poem, *The Dangerous Neighbor*, gained him considerable renown. Vasili was no doubt one of the magnets that helped to draw the Moscow *littérateurs* to the home of the Pushkins. A dandy and a gastronome, he had much in common with his brother and belonged to the same circle of intellectual *bons vivants*, in which the period abounded. Everybody liked him for his genial nature and attractive naïveté. But in his character was none of the moral shuffling of Sergei Lvovich.

The Pushkin children were always thrilled with the visits of jolly uncle Vasili, and he was a glittering focal point at the literary evenings. His lively tales of life abroad and his personal acquaintance with many famous French writers of the time enthralled his young nephew. These evenings were further hallowed by the frequent presence of great figures in Russian literature — I. I. Dmitriev, Karamzin, Zhukovski, and Batiushkov. Such a brilliant group would have done honor to the most distinguished literary *salon* of Europe at that time.

With these advantages the future poet was, so to speak, born into literature. He fell heir not merely to a literary tradition but to the living representatives of this tradition. Imagine the ten-year-old Byron sitting quietly of a night in a corner of one of those big, impoverished rooms of Newstead Abbey, listening to the absorbing conversation of Coleridge, Scott, and Wordsworth. Only some such conception can give an idea of the privilege which was often afforded young Sasha Pushkin. The

guests would arrive. Sergei Lvovich at the appropriate moment led his literary friends into his well-stocked library. Sasha would steal in and snuggle up in a corner of the divan. His father noticed but did not mind. The boy knew well that absolute silence was the one condition of his presence in the room. Wine and cigars were served, and the conversation began. The youthful ears took in everything — clever puns, brilliant discussion, readings of poems, literary gossip, and town chitchat. On such occasions female guests, of course, avoided the study. For after the wine had flowed freely it is safe to say that the conversation contained much that was unsuited to women or to the young listener. However, no one seemed to care. Sasha heard and remembered everything, and his abnormally quick intelligence matured swiftly under such tutelage. Literature was a part of the domestic atmosphere of the Pushkin home, and he eagerly breathed it in. He early learned to pronounce with childish awe the word “poet.” Soon Karamzin and Zhukovski were to read his own youthful compositions, and then they recalled the dark, curly-headed child with lively eyes who sat on the divan and listened attentively. At first they were pleased, and praised, and as the compositions continued they marveled and were proud to play the part of literary foster fathers to this promising young poet.

The stimulation which the boy received from the conversation of his father’s literary friends was not the only compensation for a shoddy formal education. Like many of the cultured nobles of the time, Sergei Lvovich had collected a rich library, composed largely of eighteenth-century French philosophers, translations of the classics, and writers of belles-lettres. Here the young Sasha, who by the age of nine had developed a passion for reading, could browse to his heart’s content. As usual, his indifferent parents set no restrictions upon their son’s reading. Under such conditions it was natural enough that he should have indulged to the hilt a boy’s customary hankering after erotic books, and French eighteenth-century sensualist literature became his favorite reading material.

Fortunately, however, his instinct for knowledge was sure

and his taste broad. Young Pushkin spent sleepless nights in his father's library poring over Racine, Molière, Voltaire, La Fontaine, Parry, Gresset, Rousseau, and French translations of the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, and of Juvenal, Tasso, Ossian, and Wieland. This seems rather heavy fare for a ten-year-old scholar. But Pushkin, like the young Browning devouring the splendid library of his father, found reading books of any kind an enjoyable pastime, and the knowledge gained therefrom necessary food for a growing imagination.

A constant companion of these reading sprees was his sister. Pushkin sincerely loved Olga Sergeevna, and throughout his life they were devoted to each other. Several years after this period, when he was away at school, he addressed a poem to her, his "precious friend," in which he pleasantly recalls their hours in the library.⁸ Olga's literary taste, however, had little in common with his. Like his heroine Tatyana, and for that matter like most of the young girls of the time, Olga was an omnivorous reader of sentimental literature. Pushkin twits her in his verses on her love for the lachrymose romances of Mme. de Genlis and the elegiac poetry of Gray and Thomson, which had been translated into French and Russian.

In another early poem, *The Town*,⁹ written in the same year as these verses to his sister (1814), the young poet casts a backward glance over the reading he had done in his childhood, and his comments indicate that he had read with more than ordinary youthful discrimination. He describes how with rapture he forgot the whole world in the company of "these ghosts" of the past, these "priests of Parnassus." Voltaire, "the hoary jester," he worshiped as the "first poet among poets," and his works he read again and again. The vogue for Voltaire, which had penetrated Russia during the reign of Catherine the Great, died hard. La Fontaine was a "carefree idler," but his poetry was "charming"; and with these he includes among his favorites a list of minor French poets of the eighteenth century. One can appreciate, if not believe, the proud exaggeration of his brother, that by the age of eleven Pushkin "knew all of French literature by heart!"¹⁰

Nor in this beadroll of prized childhood authors does Pushkin neglect to tell off the names of Russian writers. Derzhavin, Dmitriev, Ozerov, Karamzin, Fonvizin, and Knyazhnin are mentioned. But their meed of praise is small. The native authors who really called forth his enthusiasm -- Bogdanovich, Batiushkov, Vasili Pushkin, Krylov, and Barkov -- were more or less imitators of the light poetry of his French favorites. What he sought and admired most in literature at this time was a frivolous attitude towards the serious things of life, a playful scepticism, and a cynical eroticism. Such was the literary climate of his father's house; and such were the compositions of his Frenchified uncle Vasili. Even the serious works of his beloved Voltaire he could not abide; but his *La Pucelle*: that was a "glorious little book, golden and unforgettable." "Klopstock, the precocious boy tried to read but failed to understand, for which it is not difficult to forgive him. And "without wings" he was afraid to soar after Milton and Camoëns, nor would he attempt to imitate Vergil.

This catalogue -- and more could be added -- of Pushkin's childhood authors is astounding enough. But the intention is not to emphasize his precocity. He early fell into the habit of substituting for the normal experience of a boy the experience one learns from books. The fact was important. Such reading not only helped to compensate for his lack of early formal schooling, but the light, amorous, and cynical French literature unfortunately fed the first passionate emotions of youth, and also deeply influenced his initial attempts at poetry.

Tradition has it that these attempts began at the age of eight. Obviously, writing poetry came to him as naturally as leaves to the trees. Nor was there any lack of incentive. The Pushkin ménage was a nest of singing birds. On those rare occasions when guests failed to appear, Sergei Lvovich would gather the children around him and declaim French verses. The father fairly exuded poetry. It became contagious in the household. Even the servants, male and female, were infected. The most proficient was the valet, Nikita Timofeevich, who composed doggerel ballads on folk-tale subjects and on the lives of robber-

heroes. Uncle Vasili provided distinguished models of his own fashioning, and the frequent literary *soirées* kept poetry in the air. The small Olga, and Lev when he was old enough, were also caught up in the fashion and later were to try their hands at versemaking.

Young Sasha acquired a command of literary French before he learned to write in his native tongue. At any rate, the first known examples of childhood verses by the greatest of Russian poets are in French. His earliest model, naturally enough, was his favorite Voltaire. And, with youthful presumption, nothing short of an epic attempt would satisfy the eight-year-old bard. This was *La Tolyade*, a grandiosely-planned parody in six cantos of Voltaire's *Henriade*. It was to tell the story of a war of dwarfs in the time of Dagobert, led by the hero Toly. He read the first four lines to his French tutor, M. Rousselot, who drove the poet to tears by laughing and ridiculing the performance. To make matters worse, the tutor complained to his mother that Sasha wasted time over such trifles, and was idle and lazy to boot. Nadezhda Osipovna punished her son. In a rage Sasha threw his manuscript in the stove and revenged himself on M. Rousselot by the various devices with which small boys make their teachers acutely unhappy. The memory of Pushkin's sister retained the opening quatrain of the destroyed *Tolyade*:

Je chante le combat que Toly remporta,
Où maint guerrier périt, où Paul se signala,
Nicolas Mathurin, et la belle Nitouche
Dont la main fut le prix d'une horrible escarmouche.

The muse, however, was not silenced by this initial frustration, and the next attempt was hardly less ambitious than *La Tolyade*. Sergei Lvovich had taught his children to admire Molière, and his own imitations, which he staged, earned him a local reputation as a dramatist. The father's efforts no doubt inspired the son. Sasha liked to compose comedies which he acted out for his sister. She was older, and Sasha looked up to her as a critic. It is recorded that one of these attempts, *L'Escamoteur*, Olga hissed off the boards, and the offended

author promptly wrote an epigram:

Dis-moi: pourquoi *L'Escamoteur*
Fut-il sifflé par le parterre?
Hélas! c'est que le pauvre auteur
L'escamota de Molière.

It is possible that these childhood verses have gained something in correctness and smoothness from the clever Olga Sergeevna, who recalled them after Pushkin had died. She also remembered that he wrote imitations of the fables of La Fontaine. Sasha most certainly won the reputation of a child-poet, and there is an incident of an occasion on which the little girls of the neighborhood surrounded the blushing, curly-headed author and begged him to write something in their albums. The few extant French verses of this period, light and humorous, gain in authenticity from the fact that they are precisely in the tradition in which he wrote his later youthful poems.

Thus Sasha Pushkin grew up in his father's house to the age of twelve, reading quantities of books, scribbling light French verses, and living more and more in a world of his own creating. Suddenly the thought struck his carefree parents that it was time for the boy to be shipped off to school. Obviously he was making little progress in the accepted rudiments of an education under the pitiful guidance of his frequently-changed *émigré* tutors. To be sure, he was stuffing his head with a more worldly knowledge garnered from a wide and varied reading, but such self-teaching had no place in the conventional ideas of an education at that time. His parents were the kind to avoid responsibility in any form. After their first unsuccessful attempts to make him a good little boy like all the other good little boys, they had more or less dismissed him from their thoughts. He went his own way, guarding his independence with all the childish obstinacy of a stubborn nature. At this time, said one of his friends, he had the character of a child of twelve and the mind of a youth of twenty. The budding seeds of genius went unnoticed, for his mother and father never took the trouble to understand their son's difficult character, which was full of contradictions and passions. The good in him was not

nurtured, and the evil was sharpened by unnatural childhood adversities.

The boarding schools at Moscow were mediocre; at Petersburg they were expensive. The Pushkins preferred the latter but could not afford them. They were considering a Jesuit school when a friend of the family, Alexander Turgenev, informed them that the emperor had just opened a lyceum at Tsarskoe Selo. The applicants were to be admitted by a competitive examination. The fact that there was no stipend involved unquestionably helped to settle the matter in the minds of the parents. They entered their son as a candidate. In the summer of 1811, accompanied by uncle Vasili, he set out for Petersburg to take the examinations. His kind grandmother gave him a little purse of a hundred rubles, which the jolly Vasili borrowed on the road and then forgot to repay. The boy left his mother and father without any regrets on either side. He was sorry to be parted from his sister, but in the chaotic Moscow home of the Pushkins Arina Rodionovna was perhaps the only one to weep sincere tears at the departure of her nursling.

CHAPTER III

An Emperor Establishes a Lyceum

O drink, my friends, this first, the flowing
cup!

In honor of our union never fail!

Bless our muse victorious; drink it up;

To our Lyceum, God bless her, all hail!

The Nineteenth of October

Pushkin seemed destined to annoy monarchs. While still in swaddling clothes he had provoked the anger of mad Paul I. In school a prank aroused the ire of his son, Alexander I. Later Pushkin offended that emperor in a more serious manner. And on various occasions Nicholas I found Pushkin a most vexatious subject. Since tsars provided him with an education and lent him money, perhaps they had some reason to think him ungrateful.

Pushkin, however, never ceased to be grateful for the opportunity to spend six years in the Lyceum of Tsarskoe Selo, and this experience exercised a great influence on his development as a man and a poet. A fine excess of idealism lay behind most of the constructive projects of Alexander I, and the idea of a lyceum was no exception. The institution was unlike any school then existing in Russia. Children of noble families scorned the gymnasium as "too common"; and the universities at Moscow and Petersburg did not command much respect. Yet the government wished to attract well-educated members of the best families into civil and military service. To train such government officials was the guiding factor in the establishment of the Lyceum of Tsarskoe Selo. Ironically enough, its most illustrious graduate was to be Russia's greatest poet.

La Harpe, the Swiss tutor of Alexander I, had no doubt encouraged some of the liberal educational ideals which his pupil wished to incorporate in the new school. And that other extraordinary liberal influence on the emperor, Count M. M. Sper-

anski, had a hand in fashioning the curriculum. It is pretty certain, also, that the newly-formed Napoleonic *lycées* and the famous public schools of England served as models for Alexander. The program of studies was to eliminate sciences, such as chemistry, astronomy, and higher mathematics, which were of no use to future judges, ministers, and diplomats. The history of philosophical opinion about the soul, and the teaching of abstract ideas in general, were ruled out as inconsequential in forming the intellect of youth. Above all, there was to be no narrowing, pompous pedantry. The curriculum called for strictly liberal studies: languages, moral philosophy and logic, simple mathematics, law, history, geography, literature, art, rhetoric, drawing, writing, gymnastics, dancing, fencing, riding, and swimming. Here was an educational paradise, perhaps better calculated to produce cultured men of the world than skilled diplomats and learned judges. The enrollment was limited to fifty, the age of entering students set at ten to fourteen, and the course divided into two periods of three years each. At first Alexander intended that his two young brothers, Nicholas, the future tsar, and Mikhail, should be educated in the Lyceum. He hoped that these royal youths, by coming in contact with such studies and with a group of boys drawn from cultured homes, would learn some of the liberal idealism that had inspired their emperor. Apparently this was carrying liberalism and democracy too far. Their mother objected, and the young princes were never allowed to sit at the benches of the Lyceum of Tsarskoe Selo.

From the very outset this liberal training school for future statesmen took a privileged position among the educational institutions of Russia. The Lyceum was designed to be something more than a gymnasium, and to retain the best features of a university without subscribing to the narrow scientific curricula then much in vogue. To add dignity to the school it was placed under the control of a director who was responsible to the emperor. And its teachers were to be among the best in Russia. In certain cases they were even sent abroad to acquire a final polish which would better fit them to instruct boys from whom

so much was expected. A concluding touch of imperial favor was the decision to locate the Lyceum in a great wing of the tsar's palace at Tsarskoe Selo, only a few miles from Petersburg. Here the prospective students would be close to the royal family, and they would have as their playground the beautiful and expansive gardens of the emperor. One can readily understand why the Pushkins were eager to avail themselves of this golden opportunity to further the education of their son. Besides, it was all free.

II

On a day in August 1811 an official in a large room of the Ministry of National Education at Petersburg solemnly read off a list of names. "Alexander Pushkin!" he intoned. A lively, curly-headed, quick-eyed youngster stepped forward, looking somewhat confused. Other boys in turn answered to their names, and soon they were all busily at work on the examinations which were to prove their fitness to enter the Lyceum of Tsarskoe Selo.

This account is taken from the *Memoirs* of I. I. Pushchin, also a hopeful aspirant. Uncle Vasili, who knew young Pushchin's grandfather, paid a call. The two boys were introduced. Pushkin had found his "first friend," and their friendship was to remain a constant one, filled with devotion and touched with tragedy. Pushchin grew up to be a pure-souled, selfless man, one of the active figures in the unhappy Decembrist Revolt which came so close to engulfing his poet-friend.

The joyful news that they had passed the examinations and would soon be schoolmates strengthened the feeling of comradeship. Pushkin's success was hardly a favorable reflection on the schooling he had received in his father's house. The tests were not difficult, and one suspects that influence was as much a factor in securing admission to the Lyceum as ability. He was rated fourteenth in a list of thirty successful candidates. In the Russian language Pushkin received a grade of "very good"; in French, and in his particular *bête noire*, arithmetic, "good." In geography and history his examiners piously conceded that



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PUSHKIN AT THE AGE OF FIFTEEN



"he has information"; and against the German language was placed the laconic remark, "Not studied."

During the several weeks that preceded the opening of the Lyceum the two boys saw much of each other. They took walks in the Summer Garden and made friends with future students who were on the ground, especially with I. V. Malinovski, the son of the director. Pushchin, who was a good observer, has left his impressions of his companion at this time. "We all saw," he writes, "that Pushkin outstripped us, had read much about which we had not even heard, and that everything he read he remembered; but his worth consisted in the fact that he did not in the least show off or put on airs, as often happens with precocious youngsters at that age (each of us was twelve years old), who through some special circumstance find it possible to learn things sooner and more easily. Apart from his natural talent, the situation of Pushkin in his father's house and in the company of his uncle, in a circle of *littérateurs*, hastened his education but did not at all make him overbearing — an indication of fine material." ²

The day on which the new students obtained their uniforms was a banner occasion. They were gorgeous outfits, freighted with all the color, braid, and shiny buttons thought necessary to distinguish the favored pupils of the emperor's new school. The uniform consisted of a blue, double-breasted frock coat with a specially designed red collar, tight-fitting white trousers, high, glossy jackboots, and a three-cornered hat. The start of school is rarely a welcome event for the average boy, but it is easy to understand the impatience of this group for the opening of an imperial Lyceum, and for the opportunity of parading about in such resplendent uniforms.

At last the great day arrived, October 19, 1811. Every effort was made to lend dignity and importance to the formal inauguration of the Lyceum. The emperor and his wife and mother were present, along with ministers, senators, members of the Holy Synod, and various other dignitaries. After prayer at the royal chapel they all went to the audience hall of the Lyceum, which was decorated for the occasion. The imperial charter was

solemnly read. With thumping hearts the three erect rows of boys heard the concluding words: "We expect that the young people will obtain here an excellent knowledge in the sciences, a most honorable feeling of love for their native land, and a most pure morality to the honor of this institution, to the use of the fatherland, and to their own and to our satisfaction!"³

Then the director, pale as death in the presence of his tsar, made a few remarks in which he generously promised, in the name of the whole staff, "to apply every minute of our lives, all our power and abilities to tilling this new garden." But the high point of the ceremony was the fiery oration of the young and brilliant adjutant professor, A. P. Kunitsyn. He harangued the wide-eyed, wondering students on their duty to the fatherland and abjured them to make the most of their opportunity to grow and increase in knowledge. Carried away by the sound and fury of his words, he swung into a flowery peroration: "Surrounded by examples of virtue, will you not be inflamed with a love for it? Will you not prepare yourselves to serve the fatherland? . . . Sweet hope of parents! Are you not afraid to be the last in your generation? Do you wish to mingle with the crowd of ordinary people, cowering in obscurity, and every day sucked under the waves of oblivion? No! Do not let this thought corrupt your imaginations!"⁴ The twelve-year-old scholars grew restless. The long speech reminded them of the sumptuous banquet ready to be served. But the emperor was well pleased with his official orator. The next day he sent him the Vladimir Cross.

The ceremonies finally came to an end. The students filed before the platform, and the emperor smiled kindly at each in turn in acknowledging their awkward bows. With happy faces the boys were at last led into the dining room. Members of the royal family remained to inspect the meal. While the tsar chatted with the minister of education, the empress condescendingly tasted the food.

"Fine soup?" she said to a member of the staff.

"Oui, monsieur!" stammered Kornilov, bewildered by the glittering array of royalty.

She smiled, passed on, and refrained from asking any more questions. The boys snickered. Kornilov had earned his nickname. For ever after he was "Monsieur" in the Lyceum.⁵

A few days later, at the tea hour, the director announced to the boys that the minister of education forbade them to leave the Lyceum, and that parents could visit them only on holidays. The decree was part of the new educational scheme. Later it was modified to some extent. The students heard this unexpected news with many misgivings. Six long years within the walls of the Lyceum! Silently they looked at one another, and then a few of the more daring protested against such high-handed procedure. Their agitation, however, was soon forgotten in the novelty of their new life. The prohibition merely served to draw them closer together, uniting them in their isolation into a compact student family.

III

The tender roots of the twelve-year-old Pushkin had taken little hold on the rocky and shallow soil under the paternal roof. To transplant them to the fertile ground of the Lyceum was an easy, almost effortless task. The ties denied him at home were quickly formed in school, and he cherished them all his life. Pushkin gained there a rich experience, and his Lyceum days stimulated a sentiment and a devotion which never faded from his memory and found expression in some of his sincerest poetry.

But the sprouting individualism and self-assertiveness of Pushkin's nature often made it as difficult for him to get along with his companions and teachers as with his parents. He was not naturally combative, but a certain youthful shyness betrayed him into extremes of behavior. At times he would seem standoffish, the result of timidity, no doubt, rather than of any youthful desire to pose. Then suddenly he would become all life and action, a leader in boyish adventures.

There were no age-old traditions of social fitness in this new school; no hazing or fagging or winning of spurs to test the spirit and temper of the newcomers. They had all entered on an

equal footing, and they were all about the same age. As a little homogeneous band of thirty students making their own school traditions, each boy was strictly judged by his companions on his merits and on his adaptability to the Lyceum community. Pushkin was not very adaptable. He was inclined to be touchy and failed to arouse any general sympathy. Although not attempting to play a role, he had something of the eccentric about him and paid the usual price for strangeness in a conventional schoolboy society. Pushchin says of him that often his misplaced jokes and caustic remarks placed him in difficult situations, and then his awkward efforts to extricate himself did not serve to improve the strained relations with his companions. "I, as his neighbor," he writes, "when everyone was already asleep (listening at the wall on the other side of his room), frequently discussed with him in a low voice through the partition some nonsense or other in the course of the day; then I clearly saw that, because of his sensitiveness, he attached a particular importance to every prank, and this agitated him. Together we tried, as best we could, to smooth out the rough spots, but we did not always succeed. In him was a mixture of personal daring and shyness, and at times one or the other brought him to grief."⁶ Even at this early age Pushkin was beginning to show that lack of tact which later, in more important social contacts, caused him no little misery.

But a few more discerning companions found another side to Pushkin's nature. Besides his marked abilities, they discovered an unusually strong sense of honor, and an affection, and a passionate loyalty. The first to take a place with Pushchin and Malinovski in his esteem was the young Baron Delvig. Pushchin was a general favorite with the students, for he had a warm personality and entered into all the activities of the school with enthusiasm. He was Pushkin's companion in various escapades; and in all the "terribly important" secrets of schoolboy existence they were confidants. Pushkin's feeling for Delvig was something different. In the Lyceum the lazy, phlegmatic Delvig led his own life, the best expression of which was his love for poetry. It was as the first and most sensitive appraiser of

Pushkin's poetic creations that Delvig recommended himself. Their feeling for each other, which deepened in their devotion to the muse, remained the most profound and touching of all Pushkin's literary friendships.

Pushkin was also admired by another Lyceum follower of the muse, V. Kiukhelbeker. "Kiukhlya," as he was familiarly called by his comrades, or "Tapeworm," because of his height and thinness, was the standing joke of the whole school. Pushkin himself was one of the most persistent of his tormentors. He was an inoffensive, kindly boy whose German accent, un-failing awkwardness, and passion for poetry provided irresistible subjects for cruel schoolboy humor. Pushkin could not resist ridiculing his bad poetry, but this did not prevent him from repaying in kind the sincere devotion of Kiukhelbeker. Years later they were to fight a duel because of one of Pushkin's sallies, and it was much in keeping with "Kiukhlya's" Lyceum reputation that the combat should have ended in a joke.

These friendships were lasting ones, and continued long after Pushkin had left the Lyceum. But as time went on he widened the circle of his schoolboy acquaintances. Despite the antagonistic side of his nature, he did not remain aloof. For he was always ready for a prank, and took an active part in school games and exercises. His comrades quickly gave him the nickname of "Frenchman," no doubt because of his excellent knowledge of that language.

IV

Little by little we all learned
Both something and somehow or other.
Eugene Onegin

The daily program of the school during the first year was perhaps more exacting in theory than in practice. The boys, who had individual rooms, arose at six and went to prayers in the hall. From seven to nine, classes; then tea, and walking to ten; from ten to twelve, classes; from twelve to one, walking; dinner at one; from two to three, writing or drawing; from three to five, classes again; tea at five, and walking till six; then the recitation of lessons or auxiliary classes. At eight-thirty they assembled

for supper. After this meal, recreation until ten; at ten, evening prayers and lights out. The six-o'clock hour on Wednesdays and Saturdays was varied by dancing and fencing. Linen was changed twice a week, and Saturday was bath day. On holidays four dishes instead of three were served at dinner. In general the food was excellent, but this did not always prevent the customary rebellion of students against favorite dishes of the cook. On such occasions the boys vented their spleen by hurling pastry at Zolotarev, the unfortunate steward with the Dundreary whiskers. After the English fashion, a half glass of port was served at dinner. But this soon gave way to native kvass and water.

The fine educational ideals of the emperor quickly disintegrated under the fire of practical application. The mild chaos that took hold of the institution was hastened by the early death of the first director, V. F. Malinovski. Until 1816 the Lyceum was run by the professors, each trying to foist his own pedagogical theories on the students. This "interregnum," as the boys called it, was a period of pleasant license and little work. No doubt the extremely excited state of the country also had something to do with the lax discipline. It must be remembered that the great events of 1812 took place during the first year of the Lyceum. Moscow was taken by Napoleon and burned. So great was the fear of an invasion of Petersburg that officials contemplated moving the school further north into the Archangel region. Teachers and students alike followed the news of the campaign with frenzied interest. The boys played war games, wept over Borodino, and rejoiced over the repulses of the French. Caught up in the national patriotic fervor, they daily cheered the long columns of troops that filed by the Lyceum walls; and Pushkin tells how he and his schoolmates envied those who "marched past them to their death."⁷

The professors hardly lived up to their advance reputations. Perhaps something was lost in trying to realize the worthy ideal of a measure of familiarity between student and teacher. If this familiarity did not exactly breed contempt for their preceptors, it did entice the boys to take an uncommon interest in the pri-

vate lives of the teachers. They quickly learned that the erudite professor of Russian and Latin, N. F. Koshanski, had a weakness for strong drink, was a bit of a dandy, and favored the fair sex. F. M. Gauenschild, the German teacher, they disliked both for his sternness and the fact that he chewed licorice continually. Professor A. I. Galich, who replaced the sick Koshanski, was admired by all the students, and especially by Pushkin. They enjoyed his lectures and even more his relations with them outside the classroom. The level of his familiarity with the students may be judged by Pushkin's tribute to him as "a true friend of the cup" ⁸ and the companion of their nightly revels. The very excellent French instructor, De Boudry, chattered much about liberty and equality, for he was a brother of the famous Marat. But he was a favorite because of his jollity and cleverness, and the students pardoned the fact that he never took a bath on the score that it was a penance for the violent death of his brother. The only teacher who seems to have won the wholesome respect of the boys was the learned professor of moral philosophy, A. P. Kunitsyn. They complained that he turned them into machines, but for a time they listened attentively to his lectures, and the highly critical Pushkin admitted that "he formed us, he fed our flame." ⁹

On the whole, the students were not overworked. Whoever wished to avoid classes could do so with some impunity. The prescribed punishments for laziness and bad behavior would have earned the scorn of the birch-wielding masters of English schools at that time. An offender was obliged to sit apart from his comrades, and for some particularly heinous offense he was placed on bread and water for no more than two days. Certain subjects were badly taught, and German literature was imparted through French lectures, perhaps because hardly any of the students knew the German alphabet.

The free life of the Lyceum left the boys much time to read. This favorite occupation outside the classroom played almost as large a part in their education as the more formal instruction. No doubt the chief fault of the school was the "general-culture" ideal of the curiously liberal, yet bureaucratic founder. In the

attempt to teach everything that would fit them for government service, they were taught nothing well. In place of the intended purpose and aim, there were continual vagueness and indecision. As one of the students complained, "the Lyceum was not a gymnasium, not a university, not a preparatory school, but a kind of vile mingling of all of these." ¹⁰

It has become a commonplace in the biographies of great men to indicate how ineffectual their early schooling was in laying a sure foundation of knowledge. A talented boy may learn a great deal from his instructors, but he often insists on learning only what he pleases. In the Lyceum Pushkin benefited from his educational opportunities in ways that his teachers never suspected and that his biographers often ignore.

For one thing, Pushkin learned with an ease that discouraged his comrades. They marveled at his phenomenal memory. One of them tells how he could read a page of poetry once or twice and then recite it without a mistake. Zhukovski, it is said, used Pushkin's memory in correcting his own verses. For he reworked any line which Pushkin forgot, accounting it as unsuccessful. But the boy applied himself only to what he liked. The broad, undisciplined reading done in his father's library gave him an advantage over his schoolmates which they were quick to recognize. His domestic education had also encouraged habits of independence and self-direction in study which ran counter to the customary regimen of school work. Pushkin may have been a lazy scholar, but one is inclined to think that what his instructors often set down as laziness was simply a talented youth's unwillingness to learn some things which he instinctively felt were unnecessary to him.

The testimony of Pushkin's teachers represents a certain uniformity of opinion. Most of them were aware of his brilliance and quick receptivity, but they condemned him for his negligence. A report by the supervisor sums up the general impression of the instructors: "He has a talent more brilliant than well-grounded, a mind more passionate and clever than profound. His diligence in study is mediocre, for industry has not yet become a virtue with him. In reading a quantity of French

books, without the selection proper for his age, he has stored his memory with many successful passages of famous authors; he is quite well read in Russian literature, and knows many fables and verses. His knowledge in general is superficial, although he is beginning to accustom himself to sound reflection. Pride, together with ambition, sometimes makes him self-conscious. A sensitive heart, a hot, passionate temper, giddiness, and especially a sharp disputatiousness are characteristic of him.”¹¹ This is a rather searching evaluation of a fourteen-year-old boy, but the separate judgments of most of his teachers confirm it.

Koshanski suspected his talent and tried to encourage it, but he found Pushkin incorrigible. “Aroused by competition and a feeling of his own worth,” wrote Koshanski, “he wishes to be compared with the first writers.”¹² The stern Gauenschild bemoaned the fact that Pushkin had not occupied himself with German before entering the Lyceum and was not disposed to do so in his class; but he did admit that, if he wished to, “he would make the most rapid progress, being endowed with much penetration and memory.”¹³ Kunitsyn sang the same burden: “Pushkin is very intelligent, thinks, and is witty, but he is extremely unindustrious. He is capable only in those subjects which demand least application, and therefore his progress is not very great, especially with logic.”¹⁴ Naturally enough, De Boudry found Pushkin one of his best pupils in his specialty, French literature. And I. Kaidanov, the history teacher, felt that for the little effort he put in Pushkin “showed very fine progress, and this must be attributed only to his excellent talents.”¹⁵

In a list of comparative ranks, made up by the teachers a year after they had been in the Lyceum, Pushkin was rated as poor in German, logic, ethics, and mathematics; good in Russian and in French literature. But in drawing, fencing, and calligraphy his instructors unconditionally praised him — perhaps not a bad prophecy for a future poet.

Despite this rather uncomplimentary testimony, Pushkin, on other evidence, was rarely idle in the Lyceum. When he was not up to some deviltry, the time he stole from classes or from his

prescribed homework he spent in writing poetry or in feverish reading. With a sure instinct, most of what he did seemed designed to feed the flame of his genius.

v

Restrictions on individual conduct in the Lyceum were not very severe, and during the "interregnum" they lapsed more than ever. Members of the staff were considered legitimate victims for practical jokes, and students roamed at will about the emperor's gardens, stole his prize apples, and in general made themselves obnoxious to everybody. The machinery of surveillance was weak, for guards were easily bought off. Even contraband sweetmeats and liquors had their price, and with these luxuries as incentives forbidden parties were often arranged at night.

Pushkin, with the "face of a monkey," was a leader in these escapades, a "*vrai démon pour l'espièglerie*," ¹⁶ as he described himself in a poem of this time. Before supper one evening the "Frenchman," with his trusted confidant Pushchin and a few other more hesitant companions, smuggled into the room hot water, sugar, eggs, and rum. Then they proceeded to concoct a beverage which was called "egg flip." One of the less staunch of the conspirators was unequal to the drink. A supervisor detected him and reported the matter to the inspector. After supper the inspector questioned the slightly tipsy boy, and the ringleaders came forward and admitted their guilt. They were reprimanded and for two weeks were obliged to say their morning and evening prayers on their knees. Pushkin celebrated the prank in a poem.

A favorite diversion in the considerable leisure at the students' disposal was dramatic entertainment. The teachers themselves encouraged this, and several actually wrote plays, to the no small amusement of their charges. Sergei Chirikov, the drawing instructor, was not very proficient in his specialty, but he imagined himself a dramatist and read the students his long verse tragedies. He was known to them as "The Hero of the North," the title of one of his dramas. The fact that he be-

moaned his childless marriage was common knowledge in the Lyceum. And when a son, named Sergei, eventually arrived, the students gleefully hailed the new member of the family with two lines from a well-known play:

Sergei Sergeich, long belated!
How we have waited, waited, waited! ¹⁷

The boys themselves staged classical French and Russian dramas and occasionally the productions of another member of the staff who sought literary glory. This was a tutor, A. N. Ikonnikov, a talented man with an unfortunate passion for vodka. One of his plays, pleasantly entitled "A Rose Without Thorns," was put on by the boys with sad consequences for the author. The principal role was taken by the student Maslov. He did poorly in the first act, and in the next, without any warning to the spectators, the author himself appeared in the role, minus a costume and very drunk. While the mystified audience continued to guess whether or not Maslov and Ikonnikov were one and the same person, the new leading man soon managed to disorganize the whole cast by his tactics. For a time dramatics were forbidden, "in order that the students should not be diverted from their studies." ¹⁸ Nor did Ikonnikov remain much longer at the Lyceum. Pushkin, it appears, took little part in these spectacles, but the enthusiasm for drama among his comrades no doubt inspired his own attempts at playwriting in the school.

But Pushkin's love of pranks, his sharp tongue, and his passionate nature got him into difficulties with both his preceptors and comrades which he deeply regretted. His quick repartee was often amusing, as in the story of the emperor's visit to a classroom.

"Who is first here?" asked Alexander.

Pushkin promptly replied: "There is no first here, your imperial majesty; all are second." ¹⁹

But Pushkin could offend as easily as he could amuse. Even his schoolfellow, Baron Korf, though never very kindly disposed to him, could say with some justice that, apart from his

particular literary cronies, Pushkin was not especially liked by the students; and that his teachers, "afraid of his evil tongue and poisonous epigrams, peeped through their fingers at his epicurean life." ²⁰

In short, like any full-blooded youngster, the "Frenchman" made both friends and enemies at school. It would be idle to argue whether he made more of one or the other. The unfortunate traits of his character were simply nearest the surface. A Delvig or a Pushchin saw beneath the surface. "In order to love him," wrote Pushchin, "one must look on him with that complete benevolence which knows and sees all inequalities of character and other insufficiencies; for only then does one become reconciled and ends by loving them. . . ." ²¹ After all, it was only Pushchin who, in the quiet of a sleepless night, heard through the wall the penitent sobbing of "the young man in No. 14." ²²

CHAPTER IV

Literature and Love in the Lyceum

At life's beginning I remember school;
There we were children, many and untamed;
A happy family with no thought or rule.

Imitation of Dante

The general disorganization of the Lyceum during the "interregnum" came to an end when E. A. Engelhardt was appointed director in March 1816. He was a kindhearted man, adept at gaining the confidence of his students, and determined to remedy the growing reputation of the boys for bad behavior. Engelhardt's first principle was that his pupils should be pure in heart, but, unlike the stern Dr. Keate of Eton, he had no intention of flogging them until they were. For one thing, corporal punishment of any sort was forbidden, a prohibition that would have amazed the masters of similar schools in Western Europe. Engelhardt's method was one of kindness, persuasion, and good example. For him, social and moral influences were of the utmost importance in any system of education. He was convinced that the boys, shut up in their Lyceum for so long, had grown wild. They must be brought into contact with society and with normal home life. Accordingly he gained them the privilege of going outside the school walls, provided they kept within the bounds of Tsarskoe Selo. And, following his example, certain families in the town opened their doors to the students. In the summer vacation months Engelhardt took the boys on hiking trips in the neighborhood, and in winter he went skating and sleighing with them. Such treatment worked miracles, and most of the students formed a strong attachment for their new director. Engelhardt's chief fault was that he carried his paternalism too far, and where he failed to find a pure heart in a boy, judging by his own rather narrow standards, he was too quick to condemn him as altogether bad.

Pushkin soon ran afoul of the new director. One of the measures in Engelhardt's reform was to give the students, now several years older than when they had entered the Lyceum, an opportunity for wholesome feminine company. On certain evenings he invited the boys to his house, where they were entertained by his own daughters and their friends. At first Pushkin attended these *soirées* and joined in the various parlor games and songs. A young and pretty woman, who had recently lost her husband, was living with the Engelhardts. The seventeen-year-old Pushkin at once began to court her; he sent her an immodest but excellent verse epistle, *To a Young Widow*.¹ Perhaps the widow was offended by his rather mature protestation of love, or she may not have relished the poetical innuendo that her tears were for him instead of for her dead spouse. At any rate, she showed the poem to Engelhardt. What the director did in the matter is not known, but Pushkin suddenly ceased to appear at his house, and a coldness grew up between them which lasted for the rest of the Lyceum term. Pushkin, who worshiped Engelhardt, was much troubled by his comrade's attitude.

The estrangement was furthered by other unhappy events which throw light on Pushkin's character. It was the custom for the regimental band to play in the court quarters of the Guards before sunset. The noisy students were inevitable and bothersome spectators at these performances. A long, dark corridor, off which were the apartments of the empress' maids of honor, connected the Lyceum with that wing of the palace in which the Guards' room was situated. The boys used this passageway as a short cut. Then there was always the likely chance of meeting Natasha in the dark corridor and of making love to this pretty serving-girl of Princess Volkonskaya, one of the maids of honor. Natasha was well known to the students.

One afternoon the boys were going through the corridor in small groups. With his usual bad luck Pushkin went alone on this occasion. In the darkness he heard the swish of feminine skirts near him. He thought it was the sly Natasha and seized the girl in an effort to kiss her. At that unfortunate moment

one of the room doors flew open, and in the light he saw standing before him not the giggling serving-maid but her stern mistress, Princess Volkonskaya! Pushkin fled as though he had just come to grips with the devil. When he reached his comrades he at once told Pushchin of the terrible mistake. And with customary stubbornness he refused to accept his friend's wise advice that he should throw himself on the mercy of Engelhardt. Pushkin thought that a letter of apology to the princess herself would remedy the whole affair. But the princess had already complained to her brother, who in turn brought the matter to the emperor's attention.

The next day Alexander paid a visit to his director.

"What will it be next?" exclaimed the tsar. "Your students not only steal my juicy apples through the fence and beat the garden caretaker, but now they do not even permit my wife's maid of honor to go about her business!"

By this time Engelhardt had learned of the incident, and in his kind way he pleaded Pushkin's case and told how the offender wished to write a letter of apology to the princess. The tsar seemed mollified but advised that the idea of a letter should be dropped.

"I will take it upon myself to be Pushkin's advocate," said the monarch. "But tell him this is to be the last time." Then, smiling, Alexander whispered in his director's ear: "Between ourselves, the old lady is no doubt enchanted with the young man's mistake." ²

This most recent of Pushkin's escapades naturally went the rounds of the Lyceum, and it is said to have caused no little scandal at the court. A French quatrain, which pretty clearly bears the marks of Pushkin's claws, celebrates his revenge in language most uncomplimentary to the Princess Volkonskaya:

On peut très bien, mademoiselle,
Vous prendre pour une maquerelle,
Ou pour une vieille guenon:
Mais pour une Grâce — oh, mon Dieu, non! ³

Pushchin tried to use this instance of Engelhardt's kindness to prove to his friend how well disposed the director was to him.

But Pushkin remained adamant. Engelhardt, in protecting him, said Pushkin, was merely protecting himself. Clearly his grievance against the director was deep-seated. Engelhardt worried over the matter. During a recreation period he approached Pushkin, who was sitting at his desk, and asked the reason for his hostility. The boy grew confused and protested that he had no reason, and that he did not dare to be angry with his master. "Then you do not love me," replied Engelhardt. He sat down beside Pushkin and in a voice filled with emotion explained to him the strangeness of his behavior. Pushkin listened attentively, frowned, and blushed. Finally, he burst into tears and threw himself on the director's neck.

"I am at fault," he sobbed, "in that up to this time I have not understood and have not been able to appreciate you."

The fatherly Engelhardt wept himself and departed, well pleased with the boy's penitential actions. Ten minutes later he suddenly returned to say something to Pushkin. The boy, noticeably embarrassed, hastened to conceal a sheaf of papers in his desk.

"Verses, no doubt?" the director jokingly remarked. "Show them to me, if it is not a secret."

Pushkin declined.

"One does not keep secrets from a friend," said Engelhardt sweetly, and he firmly opened the desk cover and took the papers. He saw a horrible caricature of himself, adorned with several vile epigrams, amounting almost to a libel. Quietly handing back the papers, he said icily: "Now I see why you do not wish to come to my home. However, I do not know why I have merited your dislike." ⁴

II

Friends, young and choice,
In idle hours of pleasant leisure,
You loved to listen to my voice.
Eugene Onegin

Engelhardt and certain of the teachers encouraged literary efforts among the students, and the easy curriculum left plenty of leisure for such pursuits. The boys needed no prompting in

this respect. A number of them, like Pushkin, had entered the Lyceum with their pens already exercised. The lush gardens of Tsarskoe Selo and the palace surroundings, filled with monuments and reminders of the country's great historical deeds, provided an inspiring atmosphere for youthful poets; and the stirring events of war that were thrilling the nation suggested no end of patriotic subjects. Literary societies were quickly formed. Communal storytelling games were cultivated, and a whole series of so-called "national songs" came into existence. These popular songs, known to all the students, were usually anonymous. Pushkin, however, played a leading part in composing them. They consisted of nonsense verse about school pranks; or they pilloried particular instructors and students. A whole volume of such poems on Kiukhelbeker alone was collected.

A more formal kind of literary production were the school journals. These began to appear soon after the Lyceum opened. They were ordinarily short-lived attempts, bearing such fetching titles as *For Entertainment and Profit*, the *Inexperienced Pen*, and the *Youthful Swimmers*. The best, and certainly the most characteristic, was the *Lyceum Sage*. With a flourish the youthful editors announce in the opening number that the paper is the repository "of all antiquities and curiosities of the Lyceum members. To this purpose we shall insert in the journal all judgments, new poems, in general everything that has occupied, and occupies the reading public (i.e., the Lyceum)." ⁵ This announcement was obviously inspired by the professional satirical journals of the time, which in turn had taken their departure from English works of the *Spectator* and *Tatler* variety. With a sense of aping, there appeared on the title page in long-hand: "Printing permitted. Censor, Baron Delvig. Typography, K. Danzas"; and the *Lyceum Sage* humorously warns his readers "not to expect the issues to appear periodically, if at all." ⁶ There is much bad grammar and childish foolery in the numbers, together with some fine drawings and excellent poetry. On the whole, the *Lyceum Sage* is superior to the average school journal.

Pushkin, of course, was one of the leading spirits in these literary ventures, and he was ably seconded by Delvig, A. Illichevski, S. Komovski, and the insatiable poetaster, Kiukhelbeker, whom Pushkin jokingly advised to write German verse, since his Russian was so bad. For a time Illichevski, who had a clever wit and a facile pen, attempted to rival Pushkin, but he soon bowed to his vastly superior talent.

As a matter of fact, Pushkin was the poet laureate of the Lyceum. There was never any doubt about the matter. His talent was at once recognized by the boys and by his teachers. The school was not long open when Illichevski wrote to a friend: "Concerning my poetic occupation, I have made great progress, having as a comrade a certain young man who, living among the best of poets, has gone far in poetic knowledge and taste." ⁷ And in a later letter, this same seventeen-year-old poet, who has been busily engaged in composing an opera, gravely informs his friend: "Apropos of Pushkin, he is now writing a comedy in five acts, in verse, under the title of *The Philosopher*. . . . May God grant him patience and constancy, which rarely exist in young writers. . . . May God permit him to finish it — this first great work begun by him, a work with which he wishes to open his career on leaving the Lyceum. May God grant him success; the rays of his glory will be reflected on his companions." ⁸ God did not grant all these things; *The Philosopher* was never finished. But there was a bit of unconscious prophecy in Illichevski's concluding remark. The Lyceum and the students of this first course were to bask in the reflected glory of Pushkin.

"From the very beginning," recalled Pushchin, "he was our poet. How I see now that class of Koshanski's after dinner when, ending the lecture somewhat earlier than the fixed time, the professor said: 'Now, gentlemen, let us try our pens; write for me, if you please, some verses on a rose.' Our verses in general did not stick, but Pushkin in a twinkling read two quatrains which delighted all of us." ⁹ Another schoolmate describes how "our poet, withdrawing to the deserted hall of the Lyceum or to the shady walks of the garden, would stormily

knit his brows, pout, and bite his pen from vexation as he wrestled mightily with the capricious, coquettish muse; but nevertheless we all saw and heard how his light verse flew forth like 'a puff from the mouth of Eolus.'" ¹⁰

Although not very talkative with most of the students, with his literary coterie Pushkin would discuss poetry endlessly. He scribbled verses everywhere—in church, in the detention house, in the recreation hall, and especially in the mathematics class of Kartsov. Once the professor called him up to the board to do an algebra problem. For some time Pushkin stood on one foot, then on the other.

"How is it coming out? What equals X?" Kartsov finally bellowed.

"Zero!" he smilingly answered.

"Fine! In my class, Pushkin, everything ends in zero with you. Take your seat and write verses." ¹¹

Pushkin's literary superiority was not questioned, not even by the professors. If a school event had to be celebrated or a distinguished guest entertained, Pushkin was called upon to provide the official ode. When the emperor returned from abroad, the Ministry of National Education requested some verses. Pushkin modestly offered "to his majesty this weak production of an inexperienced poet." ¹² In honor of the nuptials of the Prince of Orange and the Grand Duchess Anna Pavlovna, Pushkin also wrote a solicited ode, for which the empress rewarded him with a gold watch and chain.

In the eyes of his comrades Pushkin's literary glory was immeasurably enhanced by his contacts with great authors. He not only wrote letters to such celebrities as Karamzin, Zhukovski, Batiushkov, Vyazemski, and his uncle, but they answered him and discussed his literary plans. At first, in fact, uncle Vasili seemed a bit envious of his nephew's talent, and finally he grudgingly admitted that "Alexander's verses do not smell of Latin and are entirely free from the mark of the seminary." ¹³ But the boy showed little deference to Vasili. "And so, most amiable of all the uncle-poets of this world," Pushkin writes on sending him some verses, "may I hope that you will forgive this

nine-months' pregnancy from the pen of the laziest of poet-nephews!"¹⁴ Once his uncle, Karamzin, and Vyazemski visited the Lyceum, and the renowned Karamzin is reported to have said of the boy: "In him I see a great poet."¹⁵ One may be sure that Pushkin let his literary schoolmates know that his uncle, in a letter following this visit, wrote: "We expect much from you."¹⁶

Pushkin's greatest triumph, however, was the occasion of Derzhavin's appearance at a Lyceum public examination in 1815. The students were thrilled with the prospect of seeing with their own eyes the patriarch of Russian letters, the illustrious poet of the reign of Catherine II. Pushkin never forgot the spectacle. The interest created would compare favorably with that which Pope might have aroused had he put in an appearance at Harrow when Byron was there. The old Derzhavin, who had not long to live, dozed through most of the examination. But when the subject of Russian literature was reached he came to life. His eyes shone and he was completely transformed. Finally Pushkin was called to deliver perhaps his best Lyceum poem, *Reminiscences in Tsarskoe Selo*.¹⁷ He read with unusual animation. Tears filled the old man's eyes as he heard his own poetry glorified by this boy-poet. "It is not in my power," recalled Pushkin years later, "to describe the state of my soul when I came to the line where I mention the name of Derzhavin; my youthful voice rang out and my heart beat with transporting rapture. . . . I do not remember how I ended my reading; I do not remember where I ran. Derzhavin was in ecstasy: he called for me, wished to embrace me. . . . They looked but did not find me."¹⁸

"I am not dead!"¹⁹ the ancient bard enthusiastically exclaimed at the conclusion of the performance; and later he remarked to a friend: "He is the one who will replace Derzhavin."²⁰

Such triumphs might well have turned an older head than Pushkin's, and no doubt he became somewhat vain about his growing talent. These Lyceum successes early taught him to expect applause. Indeed, some of his schoolmates seem to

have resented his attitude, if we may judge by a "national song" which was leveled at him:

Our "Frenchman" is in haste
To praise his own taste,
While he grubs for obscenities.²¹

But Pushkin came by his youthful fame legitimately. For he devoted himself to the muse with zeal, and the record of his school achievement is considerable. In his Lyceum diary for 1815, Pushkin lists some of his literary and other activities: "Yesterday I wrote the third chapter of *Fatama*, or *Human Intelligence*. Read it to S. S., and in the evening with comrades I extinguished the candles and lamps in the hall. A fine occupation for a philosopher! In the morning I read *The Life of Voltaire*. I began a comedy — I do not know whether I shall end it. The day before yesterday I wished to begin an ironic poem, *Igor and Olga*, but I wrote an epigram. . . . In the summer I shall write *A Picture of Tsarskoe Selo*."²²

In the Lyceum Pushkin wrote more than one hundred and thirty poems on an extraordinary variety of subjects. They range all the way from precise lyrics on the joys and sorrows of Venus and Bacchus to imitations of Ossian, formal odes, epigrams, and verse epistles. From a literary point of view, their form is perhaps more significant than their content, which was too often dictated by the cynical works of the eighteenth-century French poets which he read in his father's library and in school. In these youthful compositions he strove for, and in an unusual degree achieved, a purity of diction, clarity of expression, and pervasive beauty of style. Everything is kept on an even level, there are few purple patches, and adjectives are sparingly used. To be sure, there is little originality, and the marks of his models — Parny, Voltaire, Batiushkov, Zhukovski, V. L. Pushkin — are clearly discernible. It is poetry of the French classical school. But his youthful dependence could not always prevent him from expressing his own sincere emotions and thoughts.

A few of the Lyceum poets achieved a larger audience by getting their verses into print. In June 1814 Pushkin published

his first poem in the most influential Russian magazine of the day, the *Messenger of Europe*.²³ This was *To a Poet-Friend*,²⁴ written when he was only fourteen, and signed by an anagram of his name. It is a fair performance in which the author humorously advises a friend (one would like to think it was the Lyceum metromaniac, Kiukhelbeker) to abandon the art of poetry. With unconscious irony Pushkin warns him that the life of a poet is "a series of griefs, and the thunder of glory a dream."²⁵

Several other poems were published, and while still at school Pushkin received the signal honor of being elected to the Arzamas Society. This was composed of a half-serious, half-humorous group of writers, who organized themselves in 1815 to further the development of everything new in literature and to oppose a similar, though much more serious organization, the Beseda, headed by Admiral Shishkov. The Beseda championed an extremely nationalistic and conservative literary platform. Karamzin was recognized as the head of the Arzamas, and the organization included such authors as Zhukovski, Vasili Pushkin, A. Turgenev, Batiushkov, and Vyazemski. The members took nicknames (Pushkin's was "The Cricket"), and their gatherings were usually fun-fests in which they parodied the solemn and pedantic meetings of the Shishkovians, and poked fun at their literary enemies in witty satires.

However, this early and rather unique fame of the young Pushkin must not be rated at more than its face value. It is easy to forget that Russian literature at this particular time was a kind of mutual admiration society, and that such controversies as those between the Arzamas and the Shishkovians were tempests in a teapot. Authors published little, and many poets owed their fame primarily to manuscript verses. Literature had small dissemination, and the leading figures formed a more or less closed corporation, hardly known to the world at large. Although it meant a great deal to Pushkin to be accepted by such men as Karamzin and Zhukovski, the cream of Russian intellectuals, its significance hardly got beyond the limits of their own small circle. It meant that his schoolboy poetry had

achieved an elegance and finish according to the standards of very brilliant and exacting writers. Pushkin himself, after 1820, by his own enterprising talent, was to carry literature to a much wider public and to make poetry more popular than it had ever been in Russia. It is little wonder that his elders read and believed these remarkably prophetic verses of his friend Delvig, published in 1815, two years before Pushkin finished his school days:

Pushkin! Not even the woods can hide him:
The lyre betrays him with resounding song,
And Apollo will ravish him from mortals
To the immortals on divine Olympus.²⁶

III

I learned the pain of secret bliss.
Eugene Onegin

Although many of Pushkin's Lyceum love poems were of the synthetic variety, largely inspired by the erotic productions of French writers, a few of them were based on personal emotional experiences. Like his hero, Eugene Onegin, Pushkin began very early to cultivate "the science of the tender passions."²⁷ The notation "early love" in his *Program for Memoirs*²⁸ refers to a time when he was only six or seven years old. A little girl whom he saw at the dances his mother obliged him to attend, had caught his childish fancy.

By the time he entered the Lyceum the addition of a few years had deepened his perception and turned his mind to the more serious aspects of love. He began to evince an unusual responsiveness to feminine charm which did not escape the attention of his schoolmates. "Pushkin was so susceptible to women at this time," writes one of his comrades, "that when only fifteen or sixteen, by merely touching the hand of his dancing partner at a Lyceum ball, his glance grew passionate, and he snorted and wheezed like a high-spirited horse in a drove of colts."²⁹

Students roamed the Lyceum gardens and the town, when they were permitted, sniffing pretty servant girls, such as the Natasha of Princess Volkonskaya. But there was another

Natasha, an attractive but poor actress in the domestic troupe of V. V. Tolstoi. The boys were allowed to attend the performances at Tolstoi's house, and naturally they all fell in love with Natasha. Pushkin dedicated two poems to her, in which he describes how she appears in his dreams, how he is "languishing with love" and "growing weaker every hour."³⁰ The expressions are conventional and his feeling anything but profound. However, he could hunt more ambitious game, as in the unfortunate case of the young widow at Engelhardt's; and it is even reported that he thought himself in love with the charming but middle-aged wife of Karamzin. Pushkin visited the family when they stayed at Tsarskoe Selo, and took it upon himself to send the wife a love note. She showed it to her husband, and they both laughingly reprimanded the boy. The incident did not prevent her from remaining one of his closest and best friends.

None of these affairs of the heart occupied Pushkin for long. But an entry in his Lyceum diary for November 1815 tells us of his first serious love, and, poetically speaking, a very fruitful one. "I was happy!" he writes. "No, yesterday I was not happy; in the morning, standing by the window, I was tortured by expectation, by an indescribable agitation; I looked out on the snowy road — she was not to be seen! At last I lost hope; suddenly I meet her unexpectedly on the stairway. Sweet moment!

He sang of love, but his voice was so sad.
Alas! from love he learned only pain!

How nice she was! How the black dress clung to dear Bakunina! But I have not seen her for eighteen hours — ach! What a situation, what torture! But I was happy for five minutes."³¹

The object of this youthful passion was Ekaterina Bakunina, the pretty sister of one of his schoolmates. She often visited her brother and attended the Lyceum balls. The students were in raptures over her, and Pushkin had serious rivals in Illichevski and Pushchin. But Ekaterina seems to have been partial to the young poet, and no doubt they had secret meetings in the quiet garden walks. She must have been flattered by the

fact that Pushkin's first poem to her, *To an Artist*,³² had been set to music and was sung by the students.

However, if we may judge from the whole series of poems Pushkin wrote about her, Ekaterina did not return his affection with quite the abandon her lover wished. In the first group, written when his feelings were still in the uncertain stage, he merely indulges in sad thoughts about the hopelessness of his love. At "life's feast" he appears always as a "gloomy guest,"³³ and he regrets that "the flower of my youth withers from suffering."³⁴ These verses carried him over the winter of 1815 to 1816. But in the second series, written in the summer of 1816, he is for a time more hopeful and the expression of his passion more daring. He dreams about Ekaterina, tells of his "voluptuous raptures," and of the purely imaginary "consolation of secret pleasures."³⁵ But in the autumn Ekaterina left for Petersburg. The lovers had a last rendezvous, and in a poem on the event the unhappy youth tells of his premonitions of an early death. He is prepared to bid farewell to this "sad world."³⁶

Of course, Pushkin soon got over his sorrow in the active life and pleasures of the Lyceum. But the impression Ekaterina Bakunina made on his young heart long remained with him. Years later, in describing the love of the unfortunate Lenski for Olga in *Eugene Onegin*,³⁷ he had in mind his own affection for Ekaterina. And in a rejected stanza of this poem he returned, with all the force of an unforgettable memory, to this first serious love, poignantly recalling the "lively features of the charming maiden" and the emotions that "agitated my young blood."³⁸

IV

Dear friend of our Lyceum life,
With thee I share these parting moments.
To Kiukhelbeker

Towards the end of the six-year course the students made the most of Engelhardt's desire to broaden their young lives through social contacts beyond the walls of the Lyceum. The new freedom often degenerated into license. Uniformed boys

smoked openly in the gardens, roamed noisily about the town, ogled girls, and spent much time in the coffee shops. Some of them frequented the barracks of the loose-living Hussars stationed at Tsarskoe Selo. Here they indulged in drinking bouts and ribald nonsense with the officers until late hours of the night. Then they would straggle back to the locked gates of the Lyceum; a small tip quieted the porter, and the tutors had long since been asleep. Nor was it unknown for a student who had suffered defeat in a drinking contest with the Hussars to pass the whole night at the barracks.

Pushkin, impatient of restraint, abused Engelhardt's good intention more than any of the students. The stuffy bourgeois atmosphere of the game-playing families of Tsarskoe Selo, and even of Karamzin's household, where he was always welcome, bored him. He preferred making friends with the peasants and servants in the town, and the jolly Hussars he found much to his taste. The officers reciprocated by at once placing him on a comradely basis at their lively evening parties. One of the worst rakes in the regiment, Captain P. Kaverin, became his particular friend. The young Pushkin drank with the officers, addressed cynical poems to them, and in their company chased after the pretty actresses of Count Tolstoi. Under the allure of their gay life, he even dreamed of entering the regiment after he graduated. But father Pushkin quickly pricked this bubble. Yes, he might enter the infantry, but to maintain his son as a cavalry officer was much too expensive. The youth was obliged to give up the idea, but he continued his vicarious army life with the Hussars. These new acquaintances and diversions had a bad influence on his studies. Four months before graduation he received grades of zero in several subjects, even in his beloved Russian poetry.

For a youth of Pushkin's mature intelligence there was much more to be found in the company of these Hussars than valorous wassailing and smutty anecdotes. As a young cynic he could pretend to be a sworn enemy of "cold wisdom,"³⁹ and to value a "fine dinner" more than "three whole dozens of philosophers."⁴⁰ In reality his active mind was eager for wisdom

and philosophy, and certain of his soldier-friends had both. Like most of the aristocratic officers of the Guards regiments, the Hussars were a curious combination of intellectually ambitious men and forthright rakes. They had recently returned with the Russian army of occupation at Reims, where they had become infected with dangerous European liberalism. The revolutionary ideas which were to sweep so many of them into the disastrous dragnet of 1825 had already borne fruit. Pushkin and some of his schoolmates listened attentively to the Hussars' conversations about constitutional liberty, social evils in Russia, and the necessity of changing the system. Their impressionable minds were much influenced, and several of them, to their sorrow, were to attempt to realize this liberal heresy after they graduated from the Lyceum.

The one Hussar who most affected Pushkin in this respect was Colonel P. Chaadaev. Although only twenty-three in 1817, he was already a dispassionate observer, and before many years he was to be regarded as one of the most brilliant philosophical minds in Russia. Chaadaev was an idealist, devoted to the highest type of moral thinking. Pushkin had many long and earnest discussions with him which must have been a revelation to a youth who up to this time had lived, as he says, "not knowing either care or purpose or system."⁴¹ Their talks awoke in him a consciousness of Russia's destiny and opened up new paths in life. They became fast friends, and Pushkin remembered Chaadaev in verse as the first to influence him in the direction of serious and independent thought.

These contacts with older men increased Pushkin's impatience with his schoolboy life. Before the course was fairly ended, he was pluming his wings for a flight into the great world. In a letter to Vyazemski he protests that isolation is an evil to all philosophers and poets. "To be sure, the time of our graduation approaches. But a year still remains. A whole year of pluses and minuses, of laws and taxes, of the lofty and the beautiful . . . a whole year still to doze before the teacher's desk — this is terrible!"⁴²

In truth, the Lyceum had done about all it could for him.

Perhaps, like Onegin, he knew enough Latin to decipher an epigraph and place a *vale* at the end of a letter; and he had fortified his mind with a stock of historical anecdotes.⁴³ The school possessed most of the defects of the virtues which its imperial founder had hoped to plant in it. The Lyceum hardly prepared Pushkin for life, and for years he was to curse his "damnable education"⁴⁴ and the obligation he always felt of supplementing it. He saw through the pretenses both of the system and of many of the teachers. Probably no other school in Russia would have served him any better, for his may have been the usual case of the misfit genius brought into contact with educational conventions and intellectual mediocrity.

Among his schoolmates and instructors he had gained the reputation of a giddy, thoughtless, irritable, and cynical youth, who was fond of pranks and proud of his ability to turn out scurrilous epigrams. In the minds of many of his contemporaries this reputation clung to him for the rest of his life. Engelhardt's severe and final judgment on his pupil had, perhaps, more justification than many critics will allow. "The highest and final purpose of Pushkin," wrote the director, "was to shine, and in poetry alone; but there is hardly to be found in him a substantial foundation because he is afraid of every serious instruction, and his mind, having neither penetration nor depth, is an entirely superficial and French mind. This is the very best that may be said about Pushkin. His heart is cold and empty; there is neither love nor religion in him; perhaps no young heart was ever quite so empty as his. Tender and youthful feelings are debased in his imagination, profaned by all the erotic productions of French literature which, before entering the Lyceum, he knew almost by heart as a worthy acquisition of a primary education."⁴⁵

These are harsh words. It is clear that Engelhardt had little love for Frenchmen, and less for Pushkin. The opinion of his schoolmate, Baron Korf, was as harsh as the director's. "Hot-tempered to the point of madness," wrote Korf, "always scatter-brained, always steeped in his poetical dreams, with his ungovernable African passions, spoiled from childhood by praise



Sonfoto

PUSHKIN AT THE LYCEUM PERIOD



and flattery, Pushkin never had anything amiable or attractive in his manner, either at the school bench or later in society.”⁴⁶ But Korf was an envious and smug climber (he was proud of the fact that he had restraint enough to avoid the student excesses with the Hussars), and Engelhardt, though well-disposed, lacked penetration, and morally was a bit of a prig. Pushkin gave them plenty of provocation for their ill opinion, but they were inclined to see only the bad side of his nature.

For those who had eyes to see and hearts to understand, there was a lovable side to Pushkin. Arina Rodionovna and his grandmother had discovered it in the sorry period of childhood. And in the Lyceum days such close friends as Pushchin, Delvig, Malinovski, Kiukhelbeker, and Chaadaev valued him as much for the likable qualities of his character as for his unquestioned talent. Herein lies Pushkin's debt to his school. The Lyceum gave him an opportunity to form lasting friendships and to develop his genius. Here he found an encouraging literary atmosphere and friends who at once recognized his ability. Fame came to him easily in the Lyceum, as to one destined to it. There his imagination grew, and his responsiveness to various impressions of life quickened. At school Pushkin learned to sing of what he felt. Poetry was becoming the echo of his heart. And some notion of the divine mission of the poet was already beginning to dawn in his mind.

The strong feeling of comradeship among the members of this first Lyceum class, and the part Pushkin played in inspiring it, may have been somewhat exaggerated. However, his affections were anchored to the school and to his friends there as they never had become anchored to his home and his parents. For a time the old students met in Delvig's house in Petersburg, and every year a formal reunion was held. When it was possible, Pushkin always attended these gatherings. The most faithful members were largely his old literary companions, who speeded the hours of meeting with wine and verse. The sentiments of an alumnus for his alma mater grow mellow as the years pass. Pushkin was no exception. He forgot his unpleasant experiences, and the series of fine anniversary poems he wrote for these occasions is

filled with devotion to the Lyceum and with tender recollections of his comrades and their doings. In the best of these poems, *The Nineteenth of October*, he could sincerely call upon his old schoolmates:

Let each, as to his lips the cup he raises,
The good remember, and forget the ill.⁴⁷

And in those days they were more than proud of "their poet." Everybody was reading his verses; his old teacher, Koshanski, recited them to his classes. The students then at the Lyceum benches found glory for themselves in the glory of their great alumnus. For was it not Pushkin who had made their school famous?

But the road to this wider fame was still long and tortuous. The first step, however, was at hand. Graduation had at last arrived. At the public examinations which preceded the event Pushkin certainly won no fame, despite the fact that the questions and answers had been arranged beforehand by students and teachers. Only when a professor got the order of his questions mixed was there any chance of a candidate's doing badly. For Russian literature Pushkin read a cold didactic poem, *Disbelief*,⁴⁸ a theme which might have been suggested by Engelhardt as a penance for his erring student. The best Pushkin could do was to finish nineteenth on the list. For this performance he was given only a rank of the tenth class,* and a minor position in the Foreign Office.

The graduation exercises on June 9, 1817, were a kind of parody of the Lyceum's opening day, save that now the atmosphere was heavy with the sadness of farewell. The emperor graced the occasion with his presence and with fatherly tenderness addressed the graduates. Like Kunitsyn six years before, he told the boys of their holy obligations to their monarch and to the fatherland. And he concluded, having offered them the privilege of entering his service, with some well-meant advice on how to conduct themselves on the path of life. The prizes

* Peter the Great divided all public service into fourteen classes, corresponding to ranks in the army. The tenth rank was that of "collegiate secretary."

were then awarded, the Lyceum hymn sung, and after the students had filled their friends' albums with parting verses, they went their separate ways. At that moment Pushkin wept while saying farewell to the comrades with whom he had spent six years in the Lyceum of Tsarskoe Selo. But his sorrow soon vanished at the thought that at last he was free to enter the "great world."

CHAPTER V

In the Great World

J'aime et le monde et son fracas,
Je hais la solitude.

Mon Portrait

After graduating from the Lyceum Pushkin did not immediately plunge into the "great world." Instead he went directly to his mother's estate at Mikhailovskoe, in the province of Pskov, where the family now spent their summers. The simple pleasures of village life, of which he had seen nothing for over six years, amused him — the country baths, strawberry-picking, and rustic dances. At Mikhailovskoe he met Peter Hannibal, the last son of the famous Abram. The old man treated him to some of his homemade vodka and was pleased with the youth's drinking prowess. He also enjoyed the company of another relative, good-natured Pavel Hannibal. But their friendship and disparity in age did not prevent the quick-tempered Pushkin from challenging him to a duel — Pavel had stolen his partner at one of the village dances. Ten minutes later the quarrel was forgotten in wine, embraces, and impromptu verse.

Despite a genuine fondness for country life, Pushkin could never endure it for long. "I love noise and the crowd," he wrote, and after little more than a month at Mikhailovskoe he left for Petersburg. Except for two short intervals, he spent the next three years there (1817-1820).

The comparatively young Russian capital was vastly different in appearance and population from ancient Moscow. Petersburg was a European city, adorned with grandiose buildings and monuments designed by western architects and artists. Its inhabitants reflected the excitement of new ideas and impressions brought from Western Europe. Half of the population was in uniform, for it was a city of nobles, army officers, and officials. Something of the glitter and parade of Alexander I's

spectacular court was caught up by high society in general. Entertainment was done in the grand style, and the effect at state balls, the theater, the ballet, and in brilliant *salons* was one of extravagant ostentation.

But foreigners who visited Petersburg at this time often experienced a feeling of sadness and impending disaster beneath the city's external beauty and the gaiety of its high society. "Built on tears and corpses" by Peter the Great, the frightful history of its founding seemed to be indelibly stamped on the capital. Peter had intended his city to be a "window to Europe"; under Nicholas I, it soon became the "gendarme of Europe."

The restless Pushkins, who had by now moved from Moscow to Petersburg, lived in a modest seven-room apartment on the Fontanka, hard by the river. The neighborhood was poor, accommodating mostly artisans and tradesmen. Impoverished landowners, obliged to come to the city to fight lawsuits, and penniless widows with marriageable daughters also sought the cheap living-quarters in this district. Although the financial condition of the family was gradually growing worse, the Pushkins still attempted to live in style. An atmosphere of faded grandeur hung about the household. A dilapidated family carriage, harnessed to ill-fed horses, stood at the entrance, and ragged and drunken domestics cluttered the hallways. Some rooms were adorned with rich old furniture, others were entirely empty. There was an insufficiency of everything, from money to drinking glasses. When guests arrived, the servants were often sent scurrying to the neighbors for extra cooking utensils. Sergei Lvovich, untroubled by any gainful occupation, managed to keep his days occupied with the business of maintaining social contacts. He would start off in the morning in the rickety family carriage to pay his first visit, and often he did not finish his calls until well into the evening. Meanwhile, the household affairs were left to his indifferent wife. Nadezhda Osipovna ran things by fits and starts, in between her own social calls and the reception of visitors. Members of the household had grown accustomed to her tearing the sheets from anger, but it was not

always easy to put up with her capricious nature. She could not abide beards. Hence the servants had to restrict themselves to side whiskers. Nor would she tolerate smoking. Up to her death Sergei Lvovich always had to smoke his pipe by stealth in his own house.

"My corner is narrow and simple," ² Pushkin wrote to a companion. He occupied a tiny room on the floor above the family quarters, which enabled him to receive his friends with some degree of privacy. One of them describes this "corner": "We mounted the stairs; a servant opened the door and we entered Pushkin's room. By the door was a bed on which lay a young man in a striped Bokharan dressing gown, with a skull cap on his head. Beside the bed, on a table, were papers and books. In the room objects of the abode of a worldly youth were joined with the poetic disorder of a scholar." ³ Pushkin's servant was the devoted Nikita Kozlov, who literally never deserted his master from the cradle to the grave. He cared for Pushkin in his infancy, accompanied him into exile, and escorted his body to its last resting place.

The rift between Pushkin and his parents which had begun in his childhood was in no respects lessened by six years in the Lyceum. They paid him occasional visits at school, but the long separation was regretted by neither side. Now, living once again in the family homestead, Pushkin was bound to find plenty of cause for friction. The situation went deeper than clashing temperaments and mutual incompatibility. Although he never entirely lost a feeling of filial duty to his mother and father, they did nothing to stimulate in him any real affection. Later they took pride in his fame, but they were not inclined to understand or forgive his weaknesses, as they did repeatedly in the case of his younger brother. Nadezhda Osipovna's irritability increased as she grew older. And Sergei Lvovich, who spent most of his time trying to break into the circles of higher aristocracy, grew more niggardly as his financial circumstances became more straitened. Many of the quarrels between Pushkin and his parents, at this time and later, were over questions of money. Accustomed to indulge their own caprices, they

were not inclined to cater to his. If they had anything left, they preferred to spend it on the two favorite children, Olga and Lev. Pushkin received only seven hundred paper rubles* from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and this sum was entirely inadequate for the kind of life he elected to lead in the gay Petersburg world. Sergei Lvovich, who thoroughly disapproved of his son's behavior, repeatedly refused requests for funds. Pushkin asked money to buy a fashionable pair of dancing pumps. Sergei Lvovich offered him instead his own old ballroom shoes, dating back to the time of Paul I. The son bitterly recalled how his father everlastingly nagged him over eighty kopeks which he paid a cabby for driving him home when he was feeling too ill to walk. No doubt the miserliness of his father gave rise to the story that Pushkin, while rowing on the river once with Sergei Lvovich, nonchalantly threw gold pieces into the water because he liked to see their glitter in the clear depths. The anecdote does not lose its point in the face of the extreme unlikelihood that Pushkin ever possessed any gold pieces at this time with which to give his father such a moral lesson in avarice. It was inevitable that Pushkin should once again feel himself alone in the family circle. His sister often sided with him in these quarrels, and Arina Rodionovna comforted him, but his unhappy family life was partly responsible for the compensating and furious existence he sought in the pleasures of the capital.

At the beginning of the Petersburg period Pushkin was eighteen years old. By now his form and features were fixed, and the essential traits of his nature, while still to develop and change somewhat, had achieved well-defined characteristics. He was short, not quite five feet six inches in height. But his small frame was muscular and well-developed. He was a tireless walker, passionately fond of swimming and horseback riding, and was considered one of the best pupils of a popular fencing teacher. His features, however, were anything but attractive — a shock of dark curly hair, a flat nose, thick lips, and a mulatto-like complexion. His smile revealed two perfect rows

* At that time a paper ruble was worth about thirty-five cents.

of unusually large, glistening teeth. And he affected extremely long fingernails, of which he was inordinately proud. But the face was remarkably expressive, animated by a pair of brilliant eyes that suggested a world of contemplation and poetic beauty. By both friends and enemies the unattractiveness of his "African" features was forgotten under the compelling power of these extraordinary eyes.

Vivacity was Pushkin's most pronounced personal trait. "Cricket" and "Spark," his nicknames at this time, are fairly descriptive of his unusual animation and swiftness of movement. In crowds he could be morose and silent, but in a small company of intimate friends he gave full vent to his natural liveliness of spirits. The famous actress, Kolosova, in whose family circle he was a welcome visitor, appreciated this quality in him. "At our home Sasha Pushkin made us laugh with his playfulness and childish pranks. He would not sit still for a minute in any one place; twisting, jumping about, shifting seats, he would overturn mother's sewing box, entangling himself in a ball of embroidery yarn; then he would scatter the playing cards arranged by mother. 'You think you are clever, you dragon fly!' my Evgeniya Ivanovna would cry. 'Stop; enough!' For a couple of minutes Sasha would be quiet, and then he would again begin to play his pranks. Finally mother would threaten to punish the restless Sasha. 'Snip his claws!' (So she called his enormously long fingernails.) 'Hold his hand,' she would say to me, taking her scissors, 'and I'll cut them!' I would seize his hand, but he would set up a howl over the whole house, and complaining that we were hurting him, he would begin a feigned sobbing and groaning until we were driven to tears laughing at him. In a word, he was a veritable child, but truly well-mannered." ⁴

Throughout his short life Sasha Pushkin was regarded by many as a "veritable child" — the tsar's secret police would have preferred the epithet "enfant terrible" — but few, even among his close friends, would have agreed that he was "well-mannered." The mature, serious, and intellectual side of his character was too often obscured by his ebullient nature. How-

ever, this period was a time for sowing wild oats. He had the desire and plenty of leisure, for his position in the Foreign Office was purely nominal. The Cricket had the great new world of Petersburg to explore, and for a time he was to chirp gaily in it.

II

While live we may, let us live!
To Kaverin

The old caretaker extinguished the lamps on the bridge in the early hours of the morning. Most of Petersburg was still asleep. Only a few tradespeople stirred. A huckster's cart from the suburbs rolled noisily down the street, and a thick-limbed peasant woman with her milk pitcher hurried along. Thin columns of blue smoke rose from the chimneys of a few buildings. And the precise German baker in his paper cap opened the little window of his shop, ready for business.⁵ A tired horse, driven by a drowsy *izvozchik*, halted before a stone house on the Fontanka. With some difficulty a young man, wearing a high hat and a Spanish cloak thrown back over one shoulder, got out of the carriage and disappeared in the gateway. This was the Cricket arriving home from an evening of revelry with his friends of the Green Lamp.

Through his father's contacts and the friendships he had formed in the Lyceum the doors of Petersburg society were open to Pushkin. He soon revolved in a circle of worldly and rich young men. The glittering officers of the Guards gave a certain tone to this youthful society. They provided a refinement and nobility altogether admirable. But debauchery and dangerous adventures, perhaps because of immemorial army tradition, were considered orders of merit among both the officers and their friends.

The Society of the Green Lamp — so called because of the large lamp in the room of Nikita Vsevolozhski's house where the members met — had enrolled Pushkin and some of the more prominent youths in his own circle of friends. Their meetings were described as "scandalous orgies" by contemporary out-

siders and by subsequent commentators. One recalls the exaggerated gossip about the unholy mysteries of Abbot-Byron, his monk-companions, and the Paphian girls in the vaults of Newstead Abbey. Tales were told of wild debauches, drinking, card-playing, and indecent dramatic skits, such as "The Exile of Adam and Eve from Paradise" and "Sodom and Gomorrah." As a matter of fact, the Green Lamp was established largely for the purpose of reading original literary productions and for discussing subjects of contemporary interest. Nikita Vsevolozhski, one of the leaders, was a student of history and a translator of comedies; the gentle Delvig, Pushkin's poet-friend, was also a member; and Gnedich read parts of his version of Homer to the group. The morally stern Griboedov, greatest dramatist of the time, attended the meetings, as did the philosophically-minded Ya. Tolstoi. To be sure, the wine flowed freely, and there were merry feasts with female companions. Such gay young blades as Kaverin, Iurev, Yakubovich, V. Engelhardt, and Mansurov did their best to maintain the scandalous reputation of the Green Lamp. The lively Cricket was a favorite with these intellectual and pleasure-seeking bottle-companions. He was ready with witty conversation or an extemporaneous epigram; or he would read them a gracious poem. Nor did he falter in the pledges to Bacchus and Venus. "Everything goes as formerly," Pushkin writes to the absent Mansurov. "The champagne, thank God, is good, the actresses also — now they drink, now they . . . — amen, amen, so it must be — the Green Lamp is snuffed, extinguished, it seems." ⁶

The members of the Green Lamp were passionately fond of the theater. It is much to the credit of Alexander I that he encouraged one of the most brilliant periods of the Russian stage. The Imperial Theater was the center of elegant social life, and the Theatrical School, with its pretty novices, was a favorite hunting preserve of guardsmen and fashionable youths about town. Every dandy believed it his sworn duty to be at home backstage. Young men such as those of the Green Lamp were constantly devising schemes to circumvent the supervision of the stern duenna of the Theatrical School. The carriage bearing

one of the pupils to a performance would break down under suspicious circumstances. A dashing officer would opportunely drive up, proffer his services, and the charming aspirant would fail to arrive at the theater that evening.

The devotion of these youths to the actresses did not improve their behavior in the course of the performance. Pushkin has left a picture of the typical dandy at the theater, and the description unquestionably is something of a self-portrait. "Just before the start of an opera, a tragedy, or a ballet the young man saunters up and down the first ten rows of seats, steps on everybody's feet, and converses with all his acquaintances and strangers. 'Where did you come from?' 'From Semenova's, from Sosnitskaya's, from Kolosova's, from Istomina's.' * 'How fortunate you are!' 'She is acting today. She is dancing. Let's clap her, let's call her out! She is so sweet! What eyes she has, what tiny feet! Such a talent!' The curtain goes up. The young man and his friends, moving from place to place, express their delight and applaud." 7

The Cricket also stepped on feet and often made himself generally offensive to neighbors who really wished to enjoy the spectacle. One evening he entered the box of some friends in the Grand Theater, wearing a periwig (because of illness he had been obliged to shave his head). Suffering from the heat, he doffed the wig and used it as a fan during the most pathetic scene. The audience around him began to laugh. His friends remonstrated. But he slid off his chair to the floor, pulling the wig on like a hat. There he sat to the end of the performance, "making jokes at the expense of the play and the acting of the players." 8 On another occasion he applauded a scene by pounding on the bald head of a man seated in front of him. Or, for variation, he would assume the attitude of the bored fop, ignore the spectacle, yawn, stretch, stare at ladies in the other boxes, and ostentatiously display his long, golden-sheathed fingernails.

Despite this childish behavior, Pushkin soon grew deeply

* Well-known theatrical performers of the time.

interested in the theater and became a keen critic of the drama. His works contain many penetrating observations on actors, performances, and plays. Like all Petersburg society, he took sides in the fashionable theatrical war between the great actress Semenova and her rival Kolosova. The Cricket carried his partisanship to the extreme of vainly falling in love with the beautiful Semenova. He presented to her his *Notes on the Russian Theater*,⁹ in which he glorifies her genius. But on Kolosova he wrote an insulting epigram, for which later he had the good grace to ask her pardon.

Organized demonstrations in the theater and rivalries for the affections of actresses sometimes ended seriously. Duels were in fashion. The young society man, officer or civilian, eagerly sought his baptism of fire. A duel was considered a gentlemanly perquisite as well as a badge of courage. Points of honor were never lacking; often there was hardly any provocation at all. The reputation of "duelist" was a mark of distinction among the gay youth of the capital. Yakubovich, a member of the Green Lamp, became a kind of epic figure in the eyes of his comrades because of his many duels. He was the "hero of my imagination,"¹⁰ wrote Pushkin. Of course, most of these battles of honor were bloodless affairs. But tragic exceptions did occur. Such was the notorious four-cornered duel fought by friends of Pushkin over the famous ballet dancer, Istomina. It ended fatally for one of the youths, and the others were seriously compromised.

The Cricket had more than his fair share of contests in the process of making his mark in the great world. "Pushkin has a duel almost every day,"¹¹ lamented Karamzin's wife in a letter to Vyazemski. The Cricket had a touchy sense of honor, and he was also quick to give offense. We have already seen that he did not hesitate to call out his own relative, Pavel Hannibal. Even with good kind Kiukhelbeker, his Lyceum comrade, he fought a duel. The motive is uncertain and the details not fully supported. It seems that he offended Kiukhelbeker with one of his cruel epigrams. Pushkin was challenged. The duel took place in winter. The lanky "Kiukhlya," his eyes popping and

his sparse Dundreary whiskers and beard bristling, shot first and missed. According to one account Pushkin dropped his pistol and wished to embrace his friend. "Shoot! Shoot!"¹² cried Kiukhelbeker hysterically. But Pushkin complained that the snow had got into his weapon. Another version insists that the Cricket simply refused to fire, saying: "It is entirely silly, my dear. Let us go and drink tea."¹³ Still a third account insists that Pushkin shot in the air; and one contemporary even asserted that the pistols were loaded with cranberries. At any rate, the friends were quickly reconciled. Pushkin sincerely loved Kiukhelbeker, as future events were to prove.

According to an authentic incident recorded by the novelist Lazhechnikov, the young Pushkin appeared early one morning in the apartment of a certain bumptious Major Denisevich. He was accompanied by two officers of the Guards.

"What is your pleasure?" demanded the major, striking a martial pose.

"You should know that well enough," replied Pushkin in a soft voice. "You directed me to be at your place at eight o'clock. It is now a quarter to eight. We have time to select the weapons and decide on a location."

The major's face grew red.

"But I did not ask you here for that. I wished to tell you that for a young man such as you it is not right to shout in the theater, to prevent your neighbor from hearing the play. That is improper."

"You recited this lecture to me last night before many listeners," said the Cricket more forcefully. "I am not exactly a schoolboy, and I have come to discuss another matter with you. For this, few words are necessary. Here are my two seconds. This gentleman" — he indicated Lazhechnikov, who was in the major's apartment at the time — "will not refuse, I am sure, to be your witness. If it is agreeable to you . . ."

"I cannot fight with you. You are an unknown youth, and I am a staff officer . . ."

"I am a Russian nobleman, Pushkin!" the Cricket interrupted in a harsh and indignant voice. "My comrades will

testify to this. You don't need to be ashamed of having such an affair with me!" ¹⁴

The major retreated and called upon Lazhechnikov to play the part of mediator. And the upshot of the affair was that the major humbly begged Pushkin's pardon. The Cricket haughtily left the apartment, refusing to shake hands with his opponent.

In this young, hard-living Petersburg society Pushkin fully subscribed to the philosophy of his jingle:

Love and wine
We need together;
Without them man
Would yawn forever.¹⁵

With bottle-companions he visited disreputable pothouses. These escapades were of the nature of "slumming" expeditions, for the young dandies dressed in cheap clothes and professed to be interested in the morals of such places. But they were not above sampling the pleasures. On these occasions drinking prowess became almost a matter of self-preservation. Pushkin strove to excel, but his powers of consumption were not always equal to his ambitions. Sometimes the results were disastrous. His greatest feat in this respect, according to one account, was to wager that he could drink a bottle of rum and not lose consciousness. He stomached the liquor, but all sense of feeling seemed to vanish. The spectators, however, noticed that he continually moved the little finger of his left hand. When he regained his senses Pushkin stoutly protested that he had kept his finger moving as proof of the fact that he had not lost consciousness. The consensus of opinion declared him the winner of the bet. Kaverin has left in his diary an abbreviated account of one of these parties: "Shcherbinin, Olsufev, Pushkin dined with me in Petersburg — champagne placed on ice for twenty-four hours — by chance my ruling beauty (for the satisfaction of fleshly desires) went by — called her in — was insupportably warm — they asked Pushkin to perpetuate the memory of this evening for us in verses." ¹⁶ And Pushkin obliged, but the results were more indecent than poetic.

The Cricket, too, had his "ruling beauties." Although he

suffered from a consciousness of his unattractive features, the fact did not lessen a natural self-assurance in affairs of the heart. He possessed an enormous store of nervous energy and yearned after "youthful beauty with the shameless madness of desire,"¹⁷ as he exclaims in one of his poems of the time. His overtures were swift and usually successful. He had but to see a pleasing face, and he reacted at once. "More or less," he writes, "I have been in love with all the pretty women I have known."¹⁸ He was talented in love no less than in poetry. Although most of these Petersburg affairs were of a transient nature, he was capable of almost every degree or kind of love. When he experienced a strong urge he was nearly out of his mind if satisfaction were denied him.

With companions of the Green Lamp Pushkin pursued the actresses and ballet dancers. Often he was seen standing outside the dormitory of the Theatrical School, hoping for a glimpse of his beloved of the moment at one of the windows. When the fair students of the theater failed him, he fell in love with a pretty ticket-seller. But like some of his comrades, he preferred the wider and easier field of amorous activities provided by the many girls of pleasure in Petersburg. Among the smart set, tradition approved the brothel with as much fervor as it did dueling. Pushkin appeared to be tireless in these adventures. Nothing stopped him — insufficient means, advice of good friends, or the danger of injuring his health. "The Cricket hops along the boulevard and into b,"¹⁹ writes A. I. Turgenev to Vyazemski, who at that time was in service at Warsaw. Pushkin himself told Zhukovski that he "does not sleep for whole nights on end, visits brothels all day, and sometimes plays at bank in the evening."²⁰ And again we find Turgenev keeping his friend in Warsaw posted: "Pushkin is very ill. He caught a cold while waiting at the door of a certain , who would not let him in out of the rain, in order not to infect him with her own illness. What a struggle of nobleness, love, and debauchery!"²¹

It was inevitable, despite the Cricket's excellent constitution, that such dissipation should eventually take its toll. "Venus has nailed Pushkin to his bed,"²² the ever-watchful Turgenev

finally announced to Vyazemski. And this unhappy sequel to his promiscuous amours was quickly celebrated in doggerel: "Condemned by fate for my old sins, I have suffered eight days now, with drugs in the stomach, with mercury, for being indiscriminate, and repentant at heart."²³ Pushkin's lowered vitality, however, laid him open to more serious illness. At the beginning of 1818 he was dangerously sick, and in 1819 an attack of typhoid fever proved almost fatal. A rest cure at Mikhailovskoe was prescribed. Once more village life bored him. The Cricket was soon back in Petersburg, pale, thin, and with shaven head, but again hopping along the boulevard or convulsing Zhukovski and his friends until two in the morning with the representation of a comic scene between a monkey and a dog.

In the light of such behavior it is difficult to dismiss Baron Korf's lurid and much-disputed characterization of Pushkin at this time. Korf was in an excellent position to know, for he lived in the same house with the Pushkins in Petersburg. His unsympathetic attitude of the Lyceum days was in no sense improved by this continued proximity in the capital. On one occasion, in fact, the former schoolmates had a serious quarrel. Pushkin's servant, a little tipsy, offended Korf, who gave him a beating. In a rage Pushkin immediately sent a challenge, which Korf promptly returned with a note: "I do not accept your challenge for such a trifle, not because you are Pushkin, but because I am not Kiukhelbeker."²⁴

No doubt Korf's hostility considerably prejudiced his judgment in the altogether unfavorable picture he drew. "In society," he writes, "Pushkin gave himself up to debauchery of every kind, indulging day and night in an unbroken chain of bacchanalian orgies. One wonders how both his health and talent bore this mode of life, the natural accompaniment of which were frequent odious illnesses which often brought him to the brink of the grave. . . . Pushkin was not created either for society or social obligations, nor even, I think, for any higher love or sincere friendship. Two elements only dominated him — the satisfaction of fleshly desires and poetry, and in both he has

gone far. . . . Always without a penny, everlastingly in debt, often even without a decent dress coat, with constant scandals, frequent duels, intimately acquainted with tavern keepers, bawdy houses, and Petersburg harlots, Pushkin represented a type of the filthiest debauchee." ²⁵

But it is easy to lose perspective and exaggerate the significance of Pushkin's life of dissipation at this time. For six years he had been shut up in the Lyceum, where his personal freedom had been restricted in many ways. Thoroughly uncongenial parents failed to provide him with the steadying influence of an attractive home life. When he was about the age of a college undergraduate, his passionate nature was brought into contact with the brilliant and youthful society of the capital, a social set that regarded dissipation as the hallmark of the fashionable gentleman. If he was immoderate, so were his young friends. In their own remarks members of the Green Lamp did not describe Pushkin as a monster of debauchery, but simply as "one of the crowd."

On the other hand, though Pushkin felt that he had a prescriptive right, by virtue of his nobility, to a place in the best Petersburg society, in reality his material conditions often forced him to cut a sorry figure among these rich young gallants. He gambled furiously — an unfortunate habit that was to stick by him — in hopeless attempts to obtain funds for the expensive pleasures of this set. Thus, even at an early age, he began to experience an insufficiency in the social world that hurt his pride. At times one strongly suspects that the ardor with which he led his convivial existence was simply an expression of fear that he would appear to be something less, socially, than his gay companions. Even the priggish and unsympathetic Korf admitted that Pushkin was inclined to exaggerate his own vices. "He would approach a society group and stagger," one of his friends observes. "'How are you, Alexander Sergeevich?' 'O, I just drank twelve glasses of punch!' But it was all nonsense, for everybody knew that he had not downed one glass." ²⁶

III

Of course, the dashing officers of the Guards and the polished youths of aristocratic families provided the colorful aspects of Petersburg society. But there were other more settled elements that made for a cultured and enlightened background. Pushkin was as welcome here as he was among the merry feasts of the members of the Green Lamp. With an infinite capacity for all manner of enjoyment, the Cricket would hop from his bacchanalian revels into the brilliant *salons* of the city's intellectuals.

One of the most popular of these *salons* was that of Princess E. I. Golitsyna. The victim of an unhappy marriage forced upon her by the Emperor Paul, she had separated from her husband, nicknamed "the fool," and lived a life of single blessedness in Petersburg. Her beauty, clever conversation, exemplary morals, and unusual personality attracted to her *salon* the most cultured people of the city. These gatherings lasted until three or four o'clock in the morning. A fear of dying at night, supposed to have been prophesied by a gypsy fortune teller, gained for Golitsyna the reputation of never retiring until daybreak. She was known in society as the "Princess Nocturne."

Not long out of the Lyceum, Pushkin was introduced into this *salon*, which was frequented by all of his more respectable literary friends. Although the Princess Nocturne was almost twenty years older than he, she at once fascinated him. "The poet Pushkin," wrote Karamzin in a letter, "fell mortally in love with Golitsyna at our house and now spends the evenings at her place. He lies because of love, gets angry from love, yet he does not write from love."²⁷ The princess had many worshipers, and whether or not Pushkin conceived a deep passion for her is hard to say. At any rate, her cold nature was sufficient protection against his customary ardor. Karamzin, however, was wrong. Pushkin's love did inspire two short poems to Golitsyna. But there is more respectful adoration than passion in them, the kind of token one would expect from an eighteen-year-old ad-

mirer of a handsome middle-aged woman who had gained a reputation in society for culture and impeccable virtue.

Another house frequently visited by Pushkin was that of the Olenins. A. N. Olenin, the president of the Academy of Arts and director of the State Public Library, was one of the best educated men of the time. In his beautiful home he gathered about him the most talented members of the artistic world, and here the young rake Pushkin played the part of brilliant conversationalist. Some ten years later he was to propose to Olenin's pretty daughter, Anna.

One evening in the spring of 1819, the Cricket was present at Olenin's among a company of artists and social luminaries in resplendent uniforms adorned with ribbons and glittering stars. Pushkin sat in a corner and listened to Krylov, the eminent fabulist, recite his fable of *The Donkey and the Peasant*.²⁸ Suddenly a young woman entered the room, escorted by one of Pushkin's friends, Alexander Poltoratski. There was an attractive languor in her beautiful eyes and smile. He quickly learned that she was his friend's cousin, Anna Kern. The company soon began to play charades. In the course of the game Anna Kern was obliged to portray Cleopatra. As she passed Pushkin, holding a basket full of flowers, he maliciously remarked, pointing to Poltoratski:

"And this gentleman, no doubt, will play the role of the asp?"

Anna remained silent. When the guests sat down to supper Pushkin, now captivated by the young lady opposite him, tried desperately to get her attention.

"Is it possible for one to be so beautiful?" he said in a stage whisper to Poltoratski. Then the two youths engaged in a joking conversation, intended for the ears of Anna Kern, about sinners and the possibility of their damnation.

"In any case," Pushkin concluded, "in hell there will be many pretty women, and one may play at charades there. Ask Mademoiselle Kern if she would rather be in hell?"

The young lady drily answered for herself that she had no desire to end up in hell.

"Well, how about that, Pushkin?" Poltoratski inquired with a laugh.

"I change my mind," he replied. "I do not want to be in hell, even though pretty women will be there." 29

The time for departure arrived. Pushkin's eyes followed her as she entered the carriage, and her profile, outlined against the window, remained engraved on his memory. Some five years later he met Anna Kern again in entirely different surroundings. And the "fleeting vision" of that evening in the home of the Olenins returned to inspire one of his most beautiful lyrics. At this second meeting, as his "genius of pure loveliness," 30 Anna Kern responded to the poet's desires.

On the whole, young Pushkin's social connections with the best Petersburg families were well established. Wherever art and literature were honored he was a favorite guest. Besides Golitsyna and the Olenins, he frequented the homes of such well-known families as the Buturlins, the Vorontsovs, the Laval, and the Trubetskoi. He was also devoted to the dance, and few of the season's prominent balls were left unattended by him. There was to come a time when such entertainment palled, when he hated the very sight of the whirling figures and the affected gallantry of the ballroom. But then his young wife was the center of attraction, and her husband the jealous chronicler of every officer's ardent glance.

IV

My gift, like life, I squandered carelessly.
The Nineteenth of October

In the midst of dissipation and the pleasures of fashionable *salons* and balls, the poet laureate of the Lyceum did not forget his muse. It was not simply a desire for glory. Some inner compulsion obliged Pushkin to continue to pour out verse during this period of loose living. Something of his schoolboy literary fame had preceded him to the city, but naturally the sophisticated great world had nothing of the veneration of his Lyceum comrades. The youth's talent, however, was quickly

recognized by Petersburg society, and especially among the younger set he soon became a literary idol.

Pushkin's graduation from the Lyceum did little to sever his literary connections. Delvig and Kiukhelbeker also moved to Petersburg, and Pushkin saw a great deal of them. Some of the new friends he made, even among the hard-living members of the Green Lamp, had positive talent or possessed literary aspirations. In the city he renewed his acquaintance with N. N. Raevski, whom he had met among the Tsarskoe Selo Hussars, and who was to become one of his best critics. P. A. Katenin, another of these young officers with literary inclinations, also became a real influence, although his criticism of Pushkin's poetry was not always sincere. Katenin was seven years older than Pushkin, had already acquired a reputation for erudition, and was an unusually fine poet and critic. Pushkin desired to meet him. He went to Katenin's quarters, handed him his walking stick, and said: "I have come to you as Diogenes to Antisthenes. Beat, but teach!" Katenin gallantly replied: "To teach a man of learning is but to spoil him."³¹ These friends flattered the Cricket's verse, and applauded his witty epigrams and pointed criticisms.

More important than these young literary connections was the zealous guardianship of the older, established writers who had watched over Pushkin's muse in the Lyceum and now continued to encourage it during his dissolute life in Petersburg. Although the Arzamas Society disbanded in 1818, Pushkin continued to foregather with the members, such as Zhukovski, Karamzin, Batiushkov, A. I. Turgenev, Vyazemski, and Vasilii Pushkin. Nor did he hesitate, in this brilliant company, to consider himself an equal among equals. They were afraid of his epigrams, coveted his verse epistles, and in general made of him the spoiled literary child of their circle. In 1818 he became a member of the rather select Free Society of Literary Amateurs.

During this time Pushkin grew closer to Karamzin, the oldest and most distinguished writer of the group. While he was convalescing from a long siege of sickness, his days in bed were brightened by reading the first volume of Karamzin's famous

history. "Karamzin discovered ancient Russia as Columbus did America," ³² he wrote enthusiastically in his diary. But Karamzin's conservative views and his opposition to the young liberals of the time offended the freethinking Pushkin. To his face he boldly charged the ageing historian with preferring "serfdom to freedom." ³³ And in a regrettable moment he aimed an unkind epigram at Karamzin. Karamzin overlooked the offense, however, and continued to befriend the rash poet in matters that were of the utmost consequence to his future.

With Vyazemski Pushkin maintained a lifelong friendship, and their extensive correspondence is one of the liveliest and keenest in Russian letters. Vyazemski was in the government service, but more for honor than need, for he was a wealthy noble. Pushkin envied his riches and resented his aristocratic and somewhat dilettantish attitude towards literature. However, Vyazemski with the "poisonous smile," as Pushkin described him, was one of his best critics and most faithful friends. Like Vyazemski, A. I. Turgenev, highly cultured and with excellent literary taste, was another of Pushkin's guardian angels. He knew everybody, and his influence in high places was always at the disposal of the young poet.

With Zhukovski, younger than Karamzin, Pushkin's friendship deepened into a lifelong attachment. The sad, idealistic Zhukovski, whose soul burned with a clear ecstasy, was now tutor to the Grand Duke Alexander and close to the empress. He had the Cricket's full confidence, shared in all his thoughts and feelings, and was faithfully consulted in most of the important decisions of his life. His relation to Pushkin was that of an older and responsible brother who never failed to come to his aid in time of need. Pushkin regarded Zhukovski as his teacher, and under his influence first began to value the charm of elevated poetry. At Zhukovski's famous literary Saturdays Pushkin was a frequent visitor, enlivening the gathering by his verses, witticisms, and inexhaustible merriment. Upon reading a splendid poem of his pupil's, addressed to himself, Zhukovski rapturously exclaimed: "A miraculous talent! What verses! He torments me, like a specter, with his gift!" ³⁴

The faith of these older men in his genius and ultimate accomplishment must have served as a profound inspiration. Perhaps with a conviction of their own inability to achieve truly great poetry, they urged on their protégé. They regarded his loafing, pleasure-seeking existence with dismay, and vainly sought to restrain his madcap adventures. "Idleness, as the terrible destroyer of everything fine and talented, rules over Pushkin,"³⁵ Turgenev reports to Vyazemski, and he sadly itemizes the recent instances of his bad behavior. In turn Batiushkov complains to Turgenev: "It would not be bad for the Cricket to be shut up in Göttingen and fed for three years on milk soup and logic. There will be nothing sensible from him if he himself does not desire it; posterity will not differentiate him from somebody with the same name if he forgets that for a poet and a man there must be a posterity. . . . No matter how great is the talent of the Cricket, he will squander it if . . . But then his muse and our prayers will save him!"³⁶ Yet this same Batiushkov, a great poet in his own right, after reading one of the Cricket's perfect little crystal-clear poems, crumpled up the paper and cried enviously: "O, how this rascal has learned to write!"³⁷

Pushkin had learned. In fact, despite his laziness and ceaseless carousing, by 1818 he had, through constant application, almost reached the maturity of his style. Most of the products were erotic elegies or polished epigrams which he poured out indiscriminately against friend or foe. With characteristic indifference he lost a whole volume of them, already prepared for the press, to Vsevolozhski in a card game. But these licentious lyrics and verse epistles attained the very acme of ease and elegance. There was still some immaturity, and the fullness and mellowness of his later poetry were lacking, but the Pushkin form and diction, which set him apart from his contemporaries and followers, were present in all their perfection.

The Cricket, however, was not content with mere anthology pieces. His older literary friends were demanding something "great," a work that would fully test his abilities. Perhaps they also thought that such a major effort would wean him from his

youthful vices. But Pushkin insisted upon mixing pleasure and poetry. In the Lyceum he had begun a long poem on a folk-tale subject about Ruslan and Liudmila. This was to be his first bid for popular acclaim. Feverishly he worked at it in the mornings, after nights of debauchery. Fragments were read to visitors or at literary gatherings. Friends were jubilant. They prodded him on. Long periods of idleness would drive them to despair. Then sickness. Yet this was almost cause for rejoicing among the literary foster fathers. Venus might nail him to his bed, but periods of convalescence left him with nothing else to do but to compose. "Despite his disreputable form of life," writes Turgenev to Vyazemski, "he has ended the fourth canto of his poem. If there were only two or three more, then the matter would be in the hat. His first disease was the first nurse of his poem." ³⁸ In shreds and patches the work went forward, written either in the bare little room on the Fontanka or at his mother's village of Mikhailovskoe during the long days of recovering from illness. Finally in March 1820 *Ruslan and Liudmila*,³⁹ a poem in six cantos of some three thousand lines, was finished. Towards the end he had become bored with it, but the composition had cost him infinite labor.

This poem is the story of the ravishing of the Princess Liudmila on her marriage night by the wizard Chernomor. Her bridegroom, Ruslan, and three rejected suitors set out to recover Liudmila, and after many fantastic adventures she is finally rescued by Ruslan. The delicate filigree work, malicious humor, and romantic novelties provide a charming poetic pageantry. But once again it was the perfection of Pushkin's verse that both astonished and delighted his contemporaries. The expectations of his literary friends were fully realized. *Ruslan and Liudmila* heralded the advent of Russia's greatest poet. The gay Cricket, however, was not destined to be on the ground to receive the public acclaim. Before the publication of the poem certain unfortunate events obliged him to leave Petersburg.

CHAPTER VI

Among the Conspirators

Hurrah! a wandering despot
Gallops into Russia!

Noël

An ominous cloud was gathering over this gay Petersburg society. Forces were at work which aimed at the very overthrow of the imperial Russian government. Pushkin became implicated, and the consequences profoundly affected his immediate future and shadowed the rest of his life.

The wave of patriotism that swept the country during the war of 1812 attracted many of the younger and better educated members of the nobility to the colors. These men were thrilled by the lofty liberal ideals of Alexander I, conqueror of Napoleon and "liberator of Europe." They applauded the charter he granted to enslaved Poland, and his speech before the Polish Diet in 1818, in which he promised constitutional government to Russia, filled them with hope for the future of their country. These young officers learned much from their experiences in the army. They saw and deplored the stark brutality of the life of the common Russian soldier. And they observed closely the existence of freedom-loving citizens abroad, which was such a violent contrast to the sorry lot of their own autocratically-ruled countrymen. In the case of the Hussars whom Pushkin had met at Tsarskoe Selo, something has already been said of the liberal ideas which these officers imbibed in their stay in France. They had suddenly grown politically- and socially-minded. Adam Smith, Bentham, and Benjamin Constant were eagerly studied. Political economy became almost a fashion. The movement spread to thinking young men in civil service. Constitutional government and the betterment or even liberation of the serfs were advocated as panaceas for Russia's ills. At the outset the reformers had some reason to expect that

their emperor, much advertised as the great liberal of the age, would fulfil their aspirations for political and social improvements.

Then the reaction set in. After 1818 something very mysterious happened to Alexander I. No doubt the disintegration of his liberal idealism had begun several years earlier, but the reasons for the collapse have never been satisfactorily explained. Political and economic expediency played a part, yet strange emotional and psychological factors in the complex nature of the tsar unquestionably had much to do with the transformation. He fell under the influence of narrow-minded old men and pious women, extreme reactionaries and mystics. The hated tyrant and ignorant favorite, Arakcheev, practically ruled Russia.

This new situation drove the reformers to desperate measures. They had to be more discreet in expressing opinions. Secret societies were formed, much after the fashion of the contemporary Italian Carbonari. What was originally an open agitation for liberal reforms was now driven underground and spread over the whole of Russia as a forthright revolutionary movement. Many of these young officers and civilians were handicapped in their views and actions by a fluffy kind of idealism. On the whole, they were poor revolutionists. They lacked both the adversities, which would have tempered their misplaced enthusiasm, and the logic of experience, which would have corrected their impracticality. But among them were men of great sincerity and daring who possessed that capacity for sacrifice which makes for successful revolution. In any event, their efforts were soon to reach a climax in the disastrous December Revolt of 1825.

Many of Pushkin's friends in the young society of officers and wealthy youths which he frequented were involved in this widespread conspiracy. Too often their liberalism was the kind that is worked up over a bottle of wine, and their conspiratorial zeal had a large element of the tragicomic in it. But there was no essential paradox in the fact that they led, on one hand, a gay, carefree existence, and on the other were plotting the reforma-

tion of the government. Their youth, their training, and the social conventions of the time sufficiently account for their mixed allegiance.

The spirit of criticism toward things political and social which had been stirred in Pushkin by certain of his Lyceum comrades and the Hussars at Tsarskoe Selo was sharpened in the conspiratorial atmosphere of the capital. His friendship with Chaadaev continued in the city. Pushkin visited his quarters often, and their revealing conversations of the Lyceum days were renewed. Liberal discussions were not unusual even at the meetings of the Green Lamp. A few among this circle were also members of the secret political society, the Union of Welfare, and there is evidence that the Green Lamp was used as a medium for spreading radical ideas. In the letter to Mansurov, already quoted in part, Pushkin requests information from this comrade of the Lamp concerning the hated military settlements established by Arakcheev. "I love you and hate despotism," he concludes, by way of justifying his request.

A few of the homes of intellectuals which Pushkin visited were hotbeds of dangerous political debates. This was particularly true of the Turgenevs. A. I. Turgenev, one of the most highly cultured men of the age, was a liberal, and his brothers, Sergei and Nikolai, the latter a member of the Union of Welfare, were both pronounced advocates of reform. In this family circle Pushkin heard frequent denunciations of conditions in Russia which must have whetted his own appetite for social betterment.

The Cricket was surrounded by conspirators. Many future Decembrists and members of secret societies were his intimate friends. Yet Pushkin himself never actually joined the conspiracy, and the fact has resulted in a good deal of unfavorable criticism of his political sympathies. His failure to enter a secret society has even been attributed to his superstitious fear of fatal consequences. He possessed perhaps more than the average man's belief in the supernatural. During this Petersburg period he had his fortune told by an old German woman. She immediately discovered in him a remarkable man and foretold several

events in his life which later actually took place. Among other things, she predicted that he would meet death through a fair- or white-haired man (*Weisskopf*). This prophecy was curiously rationalized by Pushkin, if the account is true, and offered as one reason why he did not join a secret society. For all such organizations, he is said to have explained, were directed by a certain Adam Weisshaupt. And, he concluded: "*Weisskopf* and *Weisshaupt* are one and the same!"²

Whatever may have been Pushkin's political views later in life, it is not difficult to understand them during this youthful period. He enthusiastically exclaimed at the age of sixteen: "At heart I am a Roman; freedom boils in my breast. The spirit of a great people does not slumber in me."³ And a few years later he could write to Chaadaev in a lofty strain:

With wearied hope we have been waiting
The moment of our sacred freedom.⁴

Despite the customary fervor of youth, however, he was in no sense a revolutionist. First of all Pushkin was a poet, and all his talents and interests were centered in his art. It was not that poetry and politics were incompatible. He could play the civic lyre with good effect. But such poems were the results of sudden inspiration and not of a rooted passion for social and political justice. There can be no question that at this time of his life he was a liberal and that he sincerely deprecated the abuses of an autocratic government. However, the plain truth of the matter is that Pushkin was not vitally interested in the new political movement that was taking form all around him. He was busy living life and thinking poetry.

It is more than likely that Pushkin would have joined the Union of Welfare had he been strongly urged. There was just enough of the flavor of danger, as well as of fashion, in the enterprise to have caught his ardent fancy. Indeed, there is reason to suppose that he narrowly missed becoming a member, and the failure was of great import, for he would unquestionably have suffered the fate of death or long exile which fell to the lot of nearly all the Decembrists.

His close school friends Pushchin and Kiukhelbeker joined the Union of Welfare shortly after leaving the Lyceum. Pushchin at once became an active worker in the conspiracy. Convinced that his whole purpose in life was immeasurably ennobled by the new role, he at first thought of sharing his happiness with Pushkin and of persuading him to join the secret society. He remembered that his friend had always agreed with him on questions of reform, and he believed that Pushkin could further the cause with his poetry. Fortunately, at that precise time Pushkin was at Mikhailovskoe, and before he returned to Petersburg the young conspirator had lost his first enthusiasm for imparting his secret. Meanwhile, Pushchin began to hear tales of the Cricket's dissipated life. He recalled Pushkin's close connections with the relatively conservative members of the Arzamas and of the government. The more he reflected on the matter the more he doubted the propriety of taking him into his confidence. He began to wonder why other members of the Union, also friends of Pushkin, had not asked him to join. They must distrust him, he thought. "The uncertainty of his flaming temper and his intimacy with unreliable people frightened me," ^s wrote Pushchin. Once in the theater he observed how Pushkin buzzed about important and reactionary government officials, who treated him in a condescending manner. In friendly fashion Pushchin rebuked him for such fawning behavior. Pushkin seemed disconcerted, but during the next intermission he did the same thing.

In the meantime Pushkin had noticed that a great change had come over his Lyceum comrade. Of course, he knew that secret political societies existed, and he suspected that Pushchin had joined one. On several occasions he probed him with questions, and again Pushchin was filled with the desire to enlist him in the Union. For a time he felt that the high purpose of the conspirators might transform Pushkin's wayward existence into one of noble activity. One evening they met at N. I. Turgenev's, where a session had been called to discuss the founding of a political journal. After the discussion the two friends had a quiet chat about their Lyceum days, and Pushkin expressed

regret that an old schoolmate had failed to confide in him. Pushchin departed with his mind almost made up to ask him to join the society. But a couple of days later he met Pushkin's father on the street. The latter looked gloomy.

"How are you, Sergei Lvovich? How goes it with our Alexander?" asked Pushchin.

"Have you seen him?"

"Several days ago at Turgenev's."

"I have nothing better to do than to go about reëstablishing the reputation of my dear son. It is clear that you do not know his latest prank." ⁶ And Sergei Lvovich, with a self-pitying sigh, proceeded to relate the newest escapade of Alexander.

"I thought the matter over," said Pushchin, "and I confess that this meeting, quite by chance, made an impression on me. The idea of accepting Pushkin vanished from my mind." ⁷

II

O tyrants of the world, beware!
And you, good men, take heart and dare —
Arise, O fallen slaves!

Ode to Freedom

Though Pushkin did not actually join the Union of Welfare, he contributed in no small way to the radical movement. The personal feelings and motives that guided his behavior are not always clear. His liberal convictions of this time provided an ever-present stimulation. No doubt certain acts may justly be attributed to a youthful spirit of bravado and to a desire to be in the conspiratorial "swim" along with many of his intimate friends. To some extent he may have been merely living up to the answer he is reputed to have made to the objections of his family over some prank or other: "Without an uproar no one has ever stood out among the crowd." ⁸

Verse, of course, was the inevitable outlet for what liberal sympathies Pushkin possessed, and soon a series of political poems startled Petersburg. Epigrams dripping with sarcasm were leveled against reactionary government officials and prominent obscurantists. The Archimandrite Photius is ex-

coriated as a "half fanatic, half rogue," whose chief spiritual instruments of persuasion are "the curse, the sword and cross, and the knout";⁹ the all-powerful Arakcheev is scorned as the friend and brother of the tsar, "without mind, without feeling, without honor";¹⁰ and even Alexander I is not spared the biting reminder that as a "brave captain he ran at Austerlitz and trembled in 1812."¹¹

More sustained and serious political poems not only startled the city but decidedly horrified the conservative elements. In *The Village*¹² Pushkin laid bare the cruel and stupid existence of the peasantry. *Noël*¹³ and *The Ode to Freedom*¹⁴ amounted to deliberate warnings to all tyrants of the bloody fate in store for them. Even the most ardent reformer of these days must have been shocked by such lines as:

Despotic miscreant,
Thee and thy throne I hate!¹⁵

In verse Pushkin hailed himself as "the proud singer of freedom,"¹⁶ and this reputation quickly spread among his friends. Of course, such poems could not be printed, but they circulated in numerous manuscript versions. "Everywhere," says Pushkin, "people passed around, copied, and learned by heart *The Village*, *The Ode to Freedom*, *Hurrah, into Russia Gallops*,* and other pieces in this spirit. There was not a living man who did not know his verses."¹⁷ And another famous conspirator, Yakushkin, says of these poems that "there was scarcely a literate ensign in the army who did not know them by heart."¹⁸ The whole liberal generation of Petersburg found in Pushkin's political verse a reflection of their own ideas and feelings. The fame of their author grew by leaps and bounds.

But the Cricket did not confine his revolutionary zeal to inflammatory poetry. No doubt his growing notoriety as the unofficial literary mouthpiece of the new movement helped to beguile him into rash public statements and acts. There was a boyish daring about his behavior which must have both irritated and frightened his conspirator-friends. Once, in the hear-

* The opening line of Pushkin's political poem, *Noël*.

ing of all present at the theater, he cried out: "Now is the most secure time, for the ice floats in the Neva!"¹⁹ The obvious hint that the moment for revolt had arrived, since there was nothing to fear from the fortress in the Neva, was clear to all. A bear escaped from its keeper and ran loose in the tsar's garden at Tsarskoe Selo. The animal was killed, but people talked much about the dangerous possibility of a meeting between the bear and the emperor in one of the lonely walks of the garden. Had this happened, Pushkin declared to an audience, "only one kind creature would have been found there, and that a bear!"²⁰ A more blatant act, and one which came to the attention of the authorities, was that of the occasion when Pushkin freely displayed in the Imperial Theater the portrait of Louvel, the murderer of the Duc de Berry, which bore the inscription: "A Lesson to Kings."²¹

Pushkin's more mature friends grew deeply alarmed. A. I. Turgenev feared to send a copy of *The Ode to Freedom* to Vyazemski, explaining: "Walls may have eyes and even ears."²² And Karamzin likewise apprised I. I. Dmitriev of the situation in a letter: "Over the poet Pushkin, at present, there is not simply a cloud, but a thunder-bearing cloud."²³ These wise friends knew whereof they spoke. The police already had the Cricket under surveillance.

III

In anger and without tears I forsook
The banquets' garlands and the tinsel of Athens.
To Glinka

One morning in March 1820 Pushkin set out for the home of his friend, F. N. Glinka, and met him just outside his quarters. Glinka noticed that the Cricket's usually cheerful smile was missing and that his face was a bit pale. "I was coming to you for advice,"²⁴ said Pushkin, and hurriedly he related a strange occurrence. The previous day, when Pushkin was out, an unknown man had appeared and offered his old servant fifty rubles for permission to carry off the poet's writings. He promised to return them very shortly. But the faithful Nikita flatly refused.

After hearing this story Pushkin had burned all his papers. In the meantime he had been summoned to Count Miloradovich, the governor general of Petersburg. The friends discussed the matter at length, and finally Glinka advised him to go directly to Miloradovich and place himself at the disposal of the governor general. Pushkin went.

A few hours later Glinka, who knew Miloradovich well, visited him.

"Do you know what, my dear!" exclaimed the old count. "Pushkin has just been here. Indeed, I had been ordered to seize him and all his papers; but I reckoned it more delicate to invite him here and send for his papers. Well, he appeared, very quiet, with a bright face, and when I asked about his papers he answered: 'Count, all my verses have been burned! You will find nothing in my room. But, if it is agreeable to you, everything may be found here' — he pointed to his head. 'Order paper to be brought; I will write everything that has been composed by me — of course, with the exception of printed things — with a note that it is mine and has appeared under my name.' Paper was brought, and Pushkin sat down and wrote and wrote until he had filled a whole copybook. There it is" — pointing to a table by the window. "Now just fancy that! Tomorrow I shall carry it to the emperor. But do you know, Pushkin charmed me with his noble tone and the manner of his behavior." ²⁵

The young Pushkin was very much worried, and with reason. Rumors were flying: that the emperor had read *The Ode to Freedom* and was angered by the reference in it to the death of his father, Paul I; that his insulting epigram had reached the ears of the vengeful Arakcheev, who demanded punishment; that he was to be sent to Siberia or, even worse, to the Solovetski Monastery in the White Sea. Pushkin's worry turned into fear. The would-be radical appealed to influential friends. They had already begun to intercede. Chaadaev called upon Karamzin for help. Gnedich in tears begged Olenin to save Pushkin. Zhukovski, A. I. Turgenev, and Glinka all used their influence to avert the blow.

The situation was truly serious. It is reported that the emperor saw Pushkin's old lyceum director, Engelhardt.

"Pushkin must be sent to Siberia," said Alexander sternly. "He has deluged Russia with shocking verses. All the youths are learning them by heart." ²⁶

Engelhardt, with little reason to remember his former pupil kindly, pleaded his cause, explaining that the offense was one of youthful waywardness, and that Pushkin's talent would one day bring glory to Russia. Karamzin, after extracting a promise from the penitent poet that he would write nothing against the government for two years, promised to aid him. But the emperor had made up his mind. Pushkin's friends had softened the blow, but they could not entirely save him from punishment. Alexander decreed, apparently on the suggestion of Karamzin, that Pushkin be sent to the south of Russia for a short period. Here he was to serve under Lieutenant General Inzov, chief of the Board of Protection of Foreign Colonists in Southern Russia.

A. I. Turgenev hastened to inform Vyazemski at Warsaw. "The fate of Pushkin is decided," he writes. "Tomorrow he will set off with a courier to Inzov and will remain with him. He has become quieter and more modest, and in order not to compromise himself he even runs from me in public." ²⁷

No doubt fear and the narrow escape from exile to Siberia had chilled Pushkin's liberal zeal and chastened his conduct. It must not be forgotten that he was barely twenty-one years old when this blow fell. But there is reason to suppose that he was not entirely averse to leaving Petersburg for the south of Russia at this juncture. For one thing, the life of pleasure he had been living for three years had begun to pall, and his relations with political conspirators had left a bad taste in his mouth. Five years later, in a strange letter to Alexander I which was never sent, Pushkin retraces the events which led to his downfall and offers a curious justification for his behavior. He relates how the rumor had spread that he had been whipped by the police in a secret chancery because of certain satiric verses. Driven to despair by this humiliating story, he had contemplated both

suicide and an attempt on the emperor's life. However, a friend had convinced him of the futility of either course. "I resolved, then," concludes Pushkin, "to fill my conversation and writings with so much indignation and bravado that the government would be obliged to treat me as a criminal. I aspired to Siberia or to the fortress as a rehabilitation of my honor!"²⁸

The intention of this letter in 1825 was to secure his recall from exile, and Pushkin unquestionably drew upon his imagination in order to present to the emperor a satisfactory explanation of his acts. But it is true that the rumor of a whipping by the police had been spread by one of his acquaintances, Count F. I. Tolstoi, the "American." * For several years Pushkin bore him a grudge on this score which finally ended in a challenge. Yet evidence seems to indicate that much more than this rumor contributed to his dissatisfied state of mind in 1820. Pushkin thought of the army as an escape, and he actually appears to have contemplated suicide. It was almost inevitable that an "unfortunate love affair" should be predicated as the reason for his disillusionment. In fact, a considerable literature has grown up about Pushkin's "lost love" and the conviction that it explains his attitude at this time and for several years later. True, it is very likely that he suffered from an unrequited love. It is even more likely that he suffered from several of them. With a full awareness of the danger of reading biographical facts into a poet's works, it is still possible to say with assurance that several of Pushkin's poems after 1820 contain pointed references to a deeply-moving and unhappy emotional experience during the Petersburg period of his life. But the name of the lady and the circumstances in the case have remained a sealed book. It will be more illuminating to consider this question in detail later.

At any rate, Pushkin was not sorry to leave. Besides, he fully believed that it would be only for a short time. Like Eugene Onegin, he was afflicted with spleen. He was "wearied with the noise of balls and with turning morning into midnight."²⁹ The

* So nicknamed because of a trip he made to Alaska.

world-weariness of satiated youth was upon him. As early as March 1820 he wrote to Vyazemski: "Petersburg is stifling for a poet; I thirst for foreign regions. Perhaps the southern air will revive my spirit." ³⁰

On May 6, 1820, Pushkin set out for Ekaterinoslav. He was jauntily dressed in a red shirt with a girdle, and he wore a felt hat. Two Lyceum friends, Delvig and M. Yakovlev, accompanied him to the city limits. The government had softened its expulsion by a substantial appropriation of one thousand rubles for traveling expenses. Pushkin bore a sealed letter from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to his future guardian, General Inzov. The contents of this letter are worth quoting in part, for they represent the government's official opinion of Pushkin at this time, although it is pretty certain that Karamzin, and perhaps Zhukovski, may have been responsible for some of the details.

"The young man designated in this letter," wrote Kapodistria, "places himself under your command and solicits for himself your benevolent protection. Permit me to report certain facts about him. Filled with bitterness during the course of his whole childhood, young Pushkin left his parental home without experiencing any regrets. His heart, destitute of any filial attachments, could feel only a passionate desire for independence. This student, even at an early age, evinced an unusual talent. His progress in the Lyceum was swift, his mind aroused astonishment, but his character, apparently, escaped the attention of his preceptors. He entered the world endowed with a flaming imagination, but weak in the complete absence of those inner feelings which take the place of principles when experience has not provided us with a correct education. There are no extremes into which this unfortunate young man has not fallen, just as there is no perfection which he might not have achieved by the excellence of his talents. . . . Certain poems, especially an ode on freedom, have brought Mr. Pushkin to the attention of the government. But along with the highest beauties of design and execution, this poem reveals dangerous principles issuing from that contemporary school, or perhaps it would be better

to say, from that anarchical system which people maliciously call a system of the rights of man, of freedom, and of the independence of people. . . . Mr. Pushkin, it appears, will reform, if only we may believe his tears and promises. In any case, his patrons suppose that his penitence is sincere and that, removed for some time from Petersburg, provided with an occupation, and surrounded with good examples, one may make of him a fine servant of the government or, at least, a writer of the first rank. . . . His fate will depend on your good counsel.”³¹

It would be interesting to know Pushkin's reactions on leaving Petersburg if he could have read these farewell amenities of the Russian government. Perhaps, in his unhappy frame of mind, they would have made little difference. He had promised to say good-by to Chaadaev. Sometime later he wrote an apologetic note, in which one can detect a suggestion of the emotional and spiritual weariness that filled him upon departure: “My dear, I visited you, but you were asleep. Of what use would it have been to awaken you for such a trifle?”³²

The fact that his first great poem would see the light of day in a few weeks must have provided him with some consolation, albeit a cold one. And he had no doubt packed away in his baggage a portrait of Zhukovski, bearing the great writer's inscription: “To the victorious pupil from the conquered master, on this most solemn day on which he has finished his poem, *Ruslan and Liudmila*, 1820, March 26.”³³

CHAPTER VII

A Russian Child Harold

A seeker after new impressions,
I fled from you, my native land.
The Sun Has Set

Ekaterinoslav was over a thousand miles due south. The trip must have given the youthful exile plenty of leisure to repent his past indiscretions and to contemplate the uncertainty of his future. Officially, of course, Pushkin was not an exile. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs had simply transferred him, for the good of the service, so to speak. Nor did Pushkin regard his departure from Petersburg in the light of exile, for he fully expected to return in a few months. Only when the months lengthened into years and his appeals for a recall were denied, did he experience the bitter resentment of an outlawed person.

Pushkin arrived in the little town of Ekaterinoslav about the middle of May. He presented himself and Kapodistria's letter to General Inzov. Despite the chilling arraignment of the "recommendation," he was very well received. I. N. Inzov, a bachelor of over fifty, seemed designed by nature to tolerate a young scapegrace like Pushkin, and at the same time to inspire a certain amount of respect in him. Inzov had grown up in the army; he had learned to be severe with himself and extremely indulgent to others. A member of the Masons and the Bible Society, he possessed a softness of manner, kindness, and love for humanity that enabled Pushkin to accept any punishment from him without ever feeling offended. He was fairly well educated, read history omnivorously, and made a hobby of collecting manuscripts. Pushkin benefited much from his earthy wisdom, and in turn Inzov quickly learned to appreciate Pushkin's intellectual powers and poetic talent.

It is unlikely that the Cricket's Petersburg notoriety preceded him to Ekaterinoslav. Yet stories, of doubtful authen-

ticity, have been told of his visit to the city as though he were a marked man even at this early age. Of course, the contraband political poems may have reached Ekaterinoslav to give him a certain fame. It is reported that several local celebrities, eager to meet Pushkin, visited him in the hut where he was staying. They found him with a piece of bread, spread with caviar, in his mouth and a glass of red wine in his hand. "What is your pleasure?" he mumbled. The leader of the delegation humbly replied that they had come simply to see the poet. And the poet promptly blurted out: "Well, now that you have seen him, good-by!"¹ He is also reported to have shocked the guests at a dinner given by the governor of the province. With malice prepense, or perhaps because it was more comfortable in the hot weather, he appeared before the ladies in transparent muslin trousers, minus underwear. The shortsighted hostess, in the interests of morality, undertook a closer inspection which immediately caused her to hurry her young daughter out of the room.

In reality nothing very definite concerning Pushkin's visit to Ekaterinoslav has come down to us. He remained in the town not much more than ten days, and the only comment he himself made on the stay is hardly rich in details. In a letter to his brother he wrote briefly: "Upon arriving in Ekaterinoslav I grew bored, went boating on the Dnieper, took to swimming, and was seized with a fever, as usual with me. General Raevski, who was going to the Caucasus with his son and two daughters, found me in a delirium in a Jew's hut, without a physician and with a mug of iced lemonade. His son (you know our close bond and his invaluable service, never to be forgotten by me) proposed a trip to the Caucasian waters; a doctor who traveled with them promised to cure me on the road."²

The appearance of the Raevski family at this juncture proved to be of real consequence in Pushkin's life; and closely connected with this appearance are problems which biographers have never satisfactorily solved. We already know that Pushkin had met Nikolai Nikolaevich Raevski, two years younger than himself, among the officers at Tsarskoe Selo. They continued their friendship in Petersburg, but the nature of the "in-

valuable service" of young Raevski we have no means of knowing. Very likely it was connected with Pushkin's difficulties with the government.

In the light of certain facts, it is hard to believe that the arrival of the Raevskis in Ekaterinoslav at this precise time and the invitation to the Caucasus were matters of sheer chance. On the seventh of May, the day after Pushkin left Petersburg, Ekaterina, eldest daughter of the family, wrote from the capital to her brother in Kiev. She explains that she is sending the letter by post, "because mother forgot to send it with Pushkin."³ To have gone to Kiev would have taken him much out of his way. Hence such a request implies that Pushkin must have known the family very well. Furthermore, among Pushkin's friends there was a persistent rumor, just before he set out from the capital, that he would go to the Crimea. This rumor may easily be accounted for by the hypothesis that before he left Petersburg the Raevskis, who had planned a trip to the Crimea, had suggested to him the possibility of journeying with them. In short, they knew that Pushkin was in Ekaterinoslav and definitely planned to pass through, with the idea of picking him up for a prearranged vacation trip. However, all this is mere guesswork.

At any rate, when father and son arrived in the town, fairly late at night, they lost no time in looking up Pushkin. They found him in a vile hut, lying on a wooden bench, unshaved, pale, and ill. Tears of joy came to his eyes when he saw them. The army doctor of General Raevski, E. Rudykovski, was quickly summoned. He diagnosed the ailment as a cold, accompanied by a high temperature. But Pushkin's illness did not prevent him from setting out very soon with the Raevskis for the mineral waters of the Caucasus. The kind Inzov offered no objections, for General Raevski held himself responsible for the suspected poet. Inzov's official explanation for the sudden departure of his charge is eloquent of the man's character: "Ill-health in so young a person, and the disagreeable situation in which he finds himself because of his youth, demanded on one hand assistance, and on the other innocent distractions; there-

fore I let him go with General Raevski, who, on his way through Ekaterinoslav, willingly took him along. . . . I hope I shall not be blamed for this or be called overindulgent. In truth, he is a good lad, unfortunate only in that he ended his course of studies too soon; a learned shell remains forever a shell." ⁴ Old General Inzov well understood the temper of the exile.

II

Before me there I now behold
The proud Caucasian mountain tops.
Epilogue to Ruslan and Liudmila

By the first of June Pushkin was well on his way to the Caucasian mineral springs. His host was an unusual man. In fact, the whole Raevski family, which consisted of two sons and four daughters, was much out of the ordinary. General Raevski, a well-known hero of the 1812 war, commanded the fourth corps of the Second Army, which was then stationed at Kiev. He was well educated, interested in literature, and brought his family up in the best traditions of native and foreign culture. Nikolai, the younger son, wrote poetry, loved music and art, and possessed a fine critical sense. Colonel Alexander, the other son, was a man of strange character and dominating personality. His relations with Pushkin will be discussed presently. The four daughters, ranging from thirteen-year-old Sofya to twenty-three-year-old Ekaterina, were all attractive, and for that time excellently educated. On his way through Ekaterinoslav General Raevski was accompanied by Nikolai and the two youngest girls, Sofya and Mariya. He expected to meet Alexander in the Caucasus, and to join his wife and two eldest daughters in the Crimea.

During the early stages of the journey Pushkin lay sick in the carriage. It was almost a week before he felt like himself, since his recovery was somewhat delayed by his unwillingness to follow the doctor's instructions. But by the time they reached Goryachiya Vody (now Pyatigorsk), in the very heart of the Caucasian mountains, he had fully regained his health and spirits, and he signified the fact by playing a prank. In the

official register of the revenue commandant, he playfully described Raevski's army doctor as a "physician in ordinary" and himself as a "minor." Such a breach of legal propriety was not at all appreciated by the commandant or the doctor.

This region in the Caucasus, not long conquered by Russian arms, was still roamed by half-wild tribesmen. The lush, semi-tropical foliage of the foothills changes its variegated colors with magical swiftness. And over the impressive mountain chain towers the majestic, white, two-headed peak of Elbruz. The locality already existed as a kind of fabled paradise in Russian literature, but Pushkin was the first writer of consequence to celebrate its beauties from direct observation. Later the Caucasus inspired such authors as Bestuzhev, Lermontov, and Lev Tolstoi.

Pushkin had every opportunity to absorb new impressions, for once in the mountains the vacationists led a real outdoor life. Hikes, nights under the open southern heavens or in Kal-muck tents, the Tatar villages, and Circassian mountaineers were all a far cry from his recent Petersburg existence. "I love our Cossacks," he later wrote to his brother. "They are everlastingly on horseback, everlastingly ready to fight, and eternally cautious."⁵ At times the party had to be provided with an escort of these same Cossacks as a protection against possible attacks by hostile mountaineers. "You will understand," he continues to his brother, "how this specter of danger pleased my fanciful imagination."⁶ Pushkin thoroughly enjoyed traveling with the Raevskis. For the general it was a kind of triumphal march. Nearly every town and village provided a deputation to honor a hero of 1812. Naturally, the impressionable Pushkin was delighted to be in such company.

At Pyatigorsk Alexander Raevski joined them. The party remained in this region for almost two months, making the most of the opportunity to bathe in the healing waters of various mineral springs at Pyatigorsk, Zheleznovodsk, and Kislovodsk. On his own testimony Pushkin's health was much benefited by this treatment.

About the first of August the party set out on the return jour-

ney, heading for the Crimea by way of Kerch and Theodosia. In the little town of Kerch Pushkin sought out the so-called tomb of Mithridates. The ruins, however, failed to stir him. He plucked a flower as a token, and lost it the next day without any regret. From Theodosia the party went by boat over the Black Sea to Gurzuf on the Crimean coast. "All night I did not sleep," Pushkin later wrote to Delvig concerning this passage. "There was no moon, the stars shone; before me, in the mist, stretched the southern mountains. 'There is Chatyrdag,' the captain said to me. I did not distinguish it and, indeed, I was not curious. Before daybreak I was asleep." ⁷ Impervious to the scenery he may have been, but sad thoughts of home and the memory of far-distant friends troubled his soul. Eyewitnesses observed him pacing the deck in deep contemplation, muttering something to himself. One recalls the Byron of the first pilgrimage on the Malta packet, sitting in isolation on the deck and gloomily gazing out over the moonlit waves. There was no talented chronicler present to describe the Russian poet as "a mystery in a winding-sheet, crowned in a halo." ⁸ But the mystery of his fate profoundly stirred Pushkin on this occasion. That night he composed the beautiful and manly elegy, *The Sun Has Set*.⁹

III

I grieve for her in exile.
The Bakhchisarai Fountain

Next morning, when Pushkin awoke before Gurzuf, the captivating sight banished the memory of his doubts and sadness of the previous night. This little Tatar village is one of the most beautiful spots on the southern shore of the Crimea. A strip of sandy beach, gently washed by sunlit surf, merges into vineyards and woods. A ridge of mountains looms up in the background, and steep cliffs forming the bay drop precipitately into the water.

Here the Raevskis had obtained a large house overlooking the sea. The general's wife and his two eldest daughters, Ekaterina and Elena, were already on the ground. In these congenial surroundings Pushkin spent one of the happiest periods of his life.

He found among the Raevskis the understanding, affection, and domestic care which were so conspicuously lacking in his own family. The striking contrast both rejoiced and saddened him. In the letter to his brother, written shortly after this brief stay at Gurzuf, he gives vent to his pleasure, and at the same time plaintively suggests what a revelation this new kind of family existence was to him. "My friend," he writes, "I spent the happiest minutes of my life with the family of the honored Raevski. I did not see in him the hero, the glory of Russia's army. In him I loved a man with a clear mind, with a simple, beautiful soul; an indulgent, solicitous friend; always an agreeable, affectionate host. . . . All his daughters are charming; the eldest is an unusual woman. Judge for yourself whether or not I was happy; a free, secure life in the circle of a dear family, a life which I so love and which I have never enjoyed. The happy, southern sky; the delightful region; nature satisfying the imagination; mountains, gardens, the sea; my friend, my darling hope is to behold once again the southern shore and the Raevski family." ¹⁰

So deeply did this experience engrave itself in his memory that four years later, in a letter to Delvig, he could recall it with all his original enthusiasm: "At Gurzuf I lived an idle existence, bathed in the sea, and stuffed myself with grapes; from the first moment I grew accustomed to the southern clime and enjoyed it with all the indifference and unconcern of a Neapolitan lazaroni. Awakening at night, I loved to listen to the noise of the sea — and I listened to it for hours at a time. Not two paces from the house was a young cypress tree; every morning I paid it a visit, and I grew devoted to it with a feeling akin to friendship." ¹¹ About this same cypress a local Tatar legend exists. The natives tell how a nightingale flew to the tree and sang whenever Pushkin sat beneath its branches. Every summer the bird visited the tree. But after the poet's death the nightingale returned no more.

Pushkin spent three weeks at Gurzuf very much in the manner he describes in his letters. There were long walks in the mountains, swimming, reading, writing, and jolly conversa-

tions with the Raevskis. Among the daughters Pushkin found pleasant companionship. According to some biographers he found more than companionship, and for one reason or another evidence has been produced to prove that he was in love with the entire female half of the Raevski family, excepting the mother and the thirteen-year-old daughter, Sofya. One critic has jokingly suggested that even the Tatar serving-woman of the family was an object of his passion. It is impossible to dismiss this matter without further comment, for the question has become involved with the larger problem of Pushkin's "lost love" or "Northern love."

It has already been pointed out that Pushkin accepted his removal from Petersburg with a feeling of relief. For various reasons the capital had grown distasteful to him, and especially as the scene of an unrequited love. For some weeks after his departure Pushkin evinced an apathy and insensitivity to his surroundings which seemed to indicate the emotional deadness of a man trying to escape the memory of an unhappy and unfulfilled love. Furthermore, from 1819 to as late as 1828 we find veiled allusions in poems and letters to this mysterious experience. In support of the theory is the curious evidence of the unknown initials in the famous "Don Juan List." In 1829 he wrote in the album of Elizaveta Ushakova a long list of the Christian names of women he had loved. This "Don Juan List" was divided into "serious loves" and "light loves," and in the first part occur the initials N. N. With the exception of these initials, all the other names have been identified with reasonable certainty. Hence investigators have supposed that N. N. refers to Pushkin's "lost love." Some biographers, accepting the theory that he was actually in love with a Petersburg lady in 1819, have made determined efforts to identify her and connect her with N. N. But to date the evidence in each case has been unconvincing.

There is another school of biographers which insists that the "lost love" was one of the Raevski girls. This notion presupposes that Pushkin was not hopelessly in love with a Petersburg woman previous to his departure, or that, if he was, he quickly

forgot it in his passion for one of the daughters of General Raevski. Here the principal difficulty has been to select the right daughter, for more or less evidence has been unearthed to plead the cause in turn of Mariya, Elena, and Ekaterina. However, the champions of Mariya appear to have made out for her the strongest case.

At the time when Pushkin first met her, Mariya Raevskaya was an attractive fifteen-year-old girl with a swarthy complexion, a little turned-up nose, flashing eyes, and a vivacious temperament. In the notable *Memoirs* that she wrote many years later, there is only one mention of Pushkin, and this scarcely indicates that she was aware of the profound love for her which has been ascribed to him. Recalling an incident of the Caucasian tour, she writes: "As a poet, Pushkin long accounted himself in love with all the pretty women and young girls whom he met. On this journey, not far from Taganrog, I remember how I was traveling in the carriage with Sofya, our English companion, and a Russian nurse. On catching sight of the sea a halt was ordered; we left the carriage and rushed down in a group to admire the sea. It was an open stretch of water, and, not suspecting that the poet was following us, I began to amuse myself by running after the waves, and when they rolled up I fled from them. I ended by getting my feet wet. Of course, I said nothing about this and returned to the carriage. Pushkin found this a very graceful picture, and, poetizing my childish prank, he wrote some charming verses." The verses she refers to, and which she quotes in part, occur in a stanza of *Eugene Onegin* where Pushkin, remembering the incident, exclaims:

Then how I yearned with the sea waves
To touch her dear feet with my lips.¹²

Pushkin had an admiration for women's feet which amounted almost to an obsession. His poetry contains many rhapsodic references to them, and the margins of his copybooks are adorned with drawings of women's feet. Perhaps it is unwise to read into the lines quoted above any deeper significance than that which Mariya Raevskaya suggests in the concluding sentence

of her account: "In effect, he worshiped only his muse and poetized everything he saw."¹³

It is possible that references to his "lost love" in other poems may concern Mariya Raevskaya, but in each case the element of doubt has not been entirely resolved. And Mariya herself never gave the slightest indication that she was aware of anything other than a pleasant friendship with Pushkin. In a few years she married the Decembrist, Prince Sergei Volkonski. After the fatal revolt she bravely followed her exiled husband to Siberia, and Pushkin never saw her again. Whether his famous dedication to *Poltava* refers to Mariya and her unhappy fate will perhaps always remain a mystery.

If one were so disposed, almost as good a case could be made for the eldest daughter. In 1822 or 1823 Pushkin wrote a passionate love letter to an unknown woman whom one investigator has identified as Ekaterina Raevskaya.¹⁴ Several references in his correspondence and poetry have also been connected with her name. But once again we have no positive proof that he was in love with this woman. Certainly Ekaterina never betrayed even the possibility of such a relationship.

From what evidence we possess it is extremely hazardous to say that Pushkin did more than flirt with the eligible Raevski girls at Gurzuf. Ekaterina soon married a friend of Pushkin, and later, when he visited the family at Kamenka, he gave no indication of any passion for the sisters. The important fact in this whole troubled question is not the identity of the woman but the profound emotional experience Pushkin underwent. His state of mind after he left Petersburg, and certain poignant passages of poetry testify to the burning reality of his "lost love." It is commonly supposed that Pushkin was extraordinarily frank and boastful in affairs of the heart. But text and verse do not indicate that he possessed any more than the average male's customary vanity in this respect. He distinguished between transient affairs, which might become common knowledge, and ideal love, which must be his secret alone. And his "lost love" seems to have been such an ideal. Because he was a poet, he gave expression to the hopelessness of his passion, but

he jealously guarded from the world the woman's name. More than this, he appears to have kept her in ignorance of the deep love she inspired in him. There is some reason to believe that his "lost love" first told him the story which he later turned into his well-known poem, *The Bakhchisarai Fountain*.¹⁵ He wrote to his brother in 1823 that he hesitated to print the poem because "many places in it refer to a certain woman with whom I have been very long and very stupidly in love."¹⁶ And in still another letter, to Bestuzhev, Pushkin suggested the mysterious source of the poem in a couple of verses. The lines eventually found their way into print. In anger he wrote again to Bestuzhev, roundly rebuking him and declaring his fear that the journal containing the verses might fall into her hands. He concludes his censure: "I confess that I treasure a single thought of this woman more than the opinion of all the journals in the world and of all our public. My heads whirls!"¹⁷ The growing library of investigations devoted to the vain search for the name of the woman testifies to the success with which Pushkin guarded the secret of his "lost love."

IV

What is he, then? An imitation,
A paltry phantom, or a sample
Of Muscovite in Harold's mantle?
Eugene Onegin

However apathetic he may have been after leaving Petersburg, Pushkin was stirred into activity by the congenial atmosphere of Gurzuf. The cultured Raevskis provided him with much intellectual stimulus. But in his low spirits the muse tempted him little. In the inspiring Caucasus the only thing that he wrote was the short and excellent epilogue to *Ruslan and Liudmila*. And in this piece he laments:

The flame of poesy is dead,
And I search in vain for impressions.¹⁸

Meanwhile, *Ruslan and Liudmila* had been published in Petersburg. But the praise accorded the work did not reach the dejected poet in his mountain exile. The young Raevskis, and

especially Nikolai, were eager students of foreign literature, and English authors were among their favorites. At Gurzuf Pushkin read the poetry of Byron with them in the original. This fact was of great importance, for it marked the beginning of Pushkin's "Byronic Period," which, in a positive manner, colored the next two or three years of his life and literary output.

There is reason to suppose that Pushkin had become acquainted with Byron's works before his visit to Gurzuf. Byron's poetry had been noticed in Russia as early as 1815, and while Pushkin was still in Petersburg Byron had already begun to be loudly acclaimed and read by A. I. Turgenev, Vyazemski, and Zhukovski. It was almost inevitable that the enthusiasm of such close friends in this matter should be communicated to Pushkin. There is a tradition that even at this time he began to read Byron in the original. However, his knowledge of English then, and for some years to come, was sketchy. It was not until 1828 that he could handle the language with ease. Meanwhile, of course, he had access to French translations.

While in the Caucasus Colonel Alexander Raevski joined the group. This man, several years older than Pushkin, appears to have exercised a considerable influence over him. "He will be more than famous,"¹⁹ Pushkin wrote his brother. Alexander Raevski was the very embodiment of the Byronic spirit. A few years later Pushkin described him, with some poetic exaggeration, in the famous *Demon*, as his "evil genius," a man who laughed at life, scorned people, flouted love and freedom, and "poured cold poison into my soul."²⁰ And like an evil genius he continued to haunt Pushkin. Whether the cold cynicism and spirit of negation of Colonel Raevski were born of Byron or were real traits of his own nature, the English poet was most certainly his hero. And in their "sad meetings" he helped to infect Pushkin with the Byronic virus. Some critics are convinced that Alexander Raevski suggested the more Byronic characteristics of Eugene Onegin.

Of course, the circumstances of Pushkin's life at this time would naturally have predisposed him to a keen sympathy for Byron and his poetry. The accidents of fortune which banished

both poets from their native lands may easily have suggested a similarity in their fates which would have appealed to the imagination of the twenty-one-year-old Pushkin. Like Eugene Onegin, he was for a time to play the role of the Muscovite in Childe Harold's mantle.

It was not long before the new role found expression in poetry. *The Sun Has Set*, the elegy written on board ship during the night when the Raevskis and Pushkin were on their way to Gurzuf, was actually printed with the subtitle, "Imitation of Byron." And the manuscript contained the epigraph "Good night, my native land!" incorrectly quoted from the song in the first canto of *Childe Harold*. There can be little doubt about Pushkin's immediate inspiration. The echoes of the Childe bidding farewell to his native land are heard once again. But Pushkin is a softer Childe, more realistic and humanly sentimental. He exhibits nothing of Byron's scorn on leaving England. Rather, his melancholy thoughts are filled with regret for the friends, the loves, and the youthful pleasures he has left behind.

Pushkin, however, soon wore his mantle of Childe Harold with more swagger. At Gurzuf he drafted a long poem which he had no doubt conceived while he was in the mountains. This was *The Prisoner of the Caucasus*,²¹ the first of a series of verse narratives which were directly inspired by Byron's Eastern tales. They won for Pushkin a universal Russian popularity. There is unquestionably something of Chateaubriand's René in the Prisoner, but the poem as a whole bears the Byronic stamp. In the manner of Byron, Pushkin has imaginatively identified himself with his hero. The Prisoner has been captured by Circassians. Pushkin represents him as disgusted with the sophisticated life of cities and as suffering from an unrequited love. Here we have something of the author's own situation upon leaving Petersburg. A beautiful native girl falls in love with the Prisoner. Although he is obliged to reject her affection, she helps him to escape and then kills herself.

In truth, there is not much to the story. The significant fact is that Pushkin draws upon his own emotional and spiritual

illness, somewhat aggravated by the Byronic poison, in the psychological development of his hero. The narrative method of the poem also shows the deep impress of Byron's method in the Eastern tales. But the real charm of *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* consists of the style and the splendid descriptions of mountain life and scenery, accomplishments which were Pushkin's own.

For the next two or three years Byron remained a determining factor in Pushkin's literary development, and it is not without significance that his life during this period has been described as "Byronic." The rather cold brilliance of his youthful verse vanished, and his poetry was suffused with a new life and feeling. Upon the appearance in print of his Southern poems, *The Prisoner of the Caucasus*, *The Robber-Brothers*, *The Bakhchisarai Fountain*, and *The Gypsies*,²² with some unfairness critics enthusiastically hailed him as the "Russian Byron." Soon the country was deluged with "Prisoners," "Robber-Brothers," and "Gypsies." The whole Byronic movement in Russia must, indeed, be largely attributed to Pushkin, for the majority of imitators learned of Byron from Pushkin's own works.

V

Unhappily for Pushkin, the pleasant existence at Gurzuf terminated all too soon. General Raevski had to return to his post at Kiev, and Pushkin was under the necessity of rejoining Inzov. He set out with the general and his son, traveling on horseback along the southern shore and over the Crimean mountains to Bakhchisarai. The remarkable rock structure of Kikeneis left no trace in his memory. But in climbing the steep mountain passes he got some amusement out of the fact that they were obliged to grasp the tails of their Tatar ponies, which suggested to him some mysterious Oriental rite. After they had left the mountains behind, the first object that struck him was a northern birch. "My heart sank," he wrote. "I at once began to grieve for my beloved South!"²³ The memory of the happy days at Gurzuf was still fresh in his mind. Pushkin was much impressed by the famous Monastery of St. George and its re-

markably long flight of steps running down to the sea. Close by were the fabled ruins of the Temple of Diana where Iphigenia was sacrificed. The temple interested him, and he wrote of it to Delvig: "Apparently, mythological traditions are happier for me than historical associations. Here at least I was visited by rhymes." ²⁴

Pushkin was ill when he arrived at Bakhchisarai. The city had been the center of the Crimean khans and with it were associated many Oriental legends. Although the palace of the khans with its storied "fountain of tears" was to be the setting of his most romantic and most Byronic poem, Pushkin was at this point in no humor to appreciate it. He described his visit later: "On entering the palace I saw a ruined fountain; water fell in drops from a rusty iron spout. I roamed about the palace, indignant at the carelessness with which it had been allowed to decay and at the half-European reconstruction of several of the rooms. Almost by force N. N. [Nikolai Nikolaevich Raevski] led me up the rickety staircase to the ruins of the harem and to the khan's graveyard.

... but not of that
Was my heart then full.

I was racked with fever." ²⁵

It is not difficult to understand why these scenes, which were eventually recalled with such vividness and beauty in *The Bakhchisarai Fountain*, made little impression on Pushkin at this time. Sickness is a potent enough annihilator of interest in dead monuments and will enervate the healthiest poetic imagination. Yet Pushkin did wonder at his apathy in this case, and in the conclusion of the letter to Delvig four years after his visit to Bakhchisarai he asked: "Why is the desire in me so strong to visit once again the places I left with such indifference? Or is memory the most powerful faculty of our minds, and is everything that is subject to it likewise charmed by it?" ²⁶

The party continued to Simferopol, and there Pushkin took his leave of the Raevskis. In the meantime General Inzov had been transferred from Ekaterinoslav to Kishinev in Bessarabia,

and it was for this town that Pushkin now set out, going by way of Odessa.

Pushkin said farewell to the Raevskis with many regrets. He had spent some three months with them, and the stay at Gurzuf always remained a delightful memory. He had been given an opportunity to view the splendors of Caucasian scenery and the exotic Oriental life and customs of the Crimea, all of which provided him with lasting material for his muse. In this healthy, happy, and cultured circle the poison and disillusion of his dissipated existence in Petersburg were mitigated, if not forgotten. In the touching dedication of *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* to Nikolai Raevski, Pushkin expresses his gratitude in deeply sincere lines. When he had been ruined and saddened, when betrayed and hopeless love racked him, then, writes Pushkin:

With thee I once again found quietude;
Peace entered my heart, and we loved each other.²⁷

In the unhappy days that soon followed it is little wonder that Pushkin seized the first occasion to speed to the Raevski estate in a despairing effort to recapture the comfort and solace he had found in the bosom of this friendly family.

CHAPTER VIII

"Accursed City of Kishinev"

Pushkin arrived in Kishinev about September 20, 1820, and with the exception of a few intervals he lived there for more than two and a half years. The present capital of Bessarabia, with its Russified aristocracy of Greco-Rumanian descent, offers a striking contrast to the little town of Kishinev in Pushkin's time. Then it had all the ethnographical interest of an international bazaar, the prevailing flavor of which was Asiatic rather than European. It had only recently been annexed by Russia, and Russians constituted but a small part of the population, which was made up of an extraordinary mixture of Moldavians, Bulgarians, Albanians, Greeks, Turks, Jews, Russians, French, Germans, and Italians. Of course, the Moldavians (who had not yet discovered that they were Rumanians) were the most numerous. Many were suspiciously proud of their lineage, and even tillers of the soil called themselves "nobles." The older generation, in fezzes and waistcoats with large lace sleeves, spoke only their native language or Greek. But the young Moldavians modeled themselves after the French, and this Gallomania, not unlike that which existed among their Russian masters, was almost the only real point of social contact between conquered and conquerors. The town was situated on the muddy river Byk, and along the narrow crooked streets and dirty squares one met with a variety of dress — multi-colored caftans, Turkish pantaloons, fezzes, turbans, European frock coats, and military uniforms. There were nearly as many levels of society as there were racial types — peasants, cunning middle-class Moldavians, Greco-Moldavian aristocracy, Jewish merchants, and a small Russian administrative and army society. The unnatural gaiety and moral looseness of a frontier town existed among this conglomeration of adventurous men and exotic women. Theaters, balls, gambling,

love intrigue, and hard drinking and gypsy singing in disreputable inns were the chief amusements. Pushkin liked to compare Kishinev with Sodom, but he complained that Kishinev had all the vices and none of the enlightenment or hospitality of the Biblical city.

Here General Inzov was lord and master, but the poet in his chancellery was probably the most incorrigible citizen of Kishinev. Shortly after Pushkin's arrival the good Inzov invited him to live in his own house, one of the finest in the city. It was perched on a hillock on the outskirts and commanded a splendid view of the valley, river, and mountains in the distance. The house was surrounded by vineyards and gardens, filled with singing birds, which Inzov loved. Pushkin was allotted two rooms on the ground floor, one of which was given over to his faithful servant, Nikita.

At first Pushkin spent little time in his sparsely furnished chamber. In the morning he busied himself with reading and writing, but at a fairly early hour he sallied forth into town to enjoy the company of acquaintances. Inzov wisely understood that his poet-charge had other uses for his pen than those of a chancellery clerk. Pushkin might have made a career for himself in the army; the passion of his Lyceum days for uniforms and military action never died. But civil service he heartily disliked. Inzov soothed his own conscience by giving him a few copying tasks. In reality, most of the small commissions he foisted upon Pushkin were designed as "punishments" for some instance of misconduct.

With the instinct of a reporter of life, Pushkin quickly made friends — and enemies — among the various levels of Kishinev society. He was as much at home with the native peasantry and aristocracy as he was with Russian army officers, and soon he became an inseparable part of both the city's formal and less respectable entertainments. But Pushkin had hardly got settled when he became involved in a characteristic scrape. With three of his new acquaintances among the Russian officers, F. F. Orlov, A. P. Alekseev, and I. P. Liprandi — the latter ultimately became a close friend — Pushkin repaired to a bil-

liard room for a game and bowl of punch. The liquor worked fast, and Pushkin began to amuse himself by scrambling the billiard balls of Orlov and Alekseev. They naturally objected. Orlov called him a schoolboy, and Alekseev added that he ought to be taught a lesson. Pushkin ended by challenging them both and asking Liprandi to be his second. "I will show them that I am not a schoolboy!"¹ he angrily told Liprandi on the way home. The night air soon cooled his head. To fight a duel over something as inglorious as a billiard game now seemed ridiculous. Liprandi suggested a reconciliation. No, it was too late. His honor would suffer. Nevertheless, the next morning, over a good meal, Liprandi did succeed in making peace, but only after he had convinced Pushkin that his precious honor was unsmirched. Honor was the polar star of his short life. He steered his course by it unfailingly, and in the end it guided him to destruction.

Thus early the Kishinev reputation of Pushkin got under way. A small, rumor-mongering population did not have to wait long for additional material, and even before he left Bessarabia Pushkin's deeds and sayings had grown to the proportions of a lengthy saga. To add flavor to the early notoriety, very shortly after his arrival he turned a Moldavian song of betrayed love, which a beautiful native girl in the Green Inn sang to him, into the popular stanzas of his famous *Black Shawl*.² The lyric went singing through the town and soon was heard all over Russia. V. P. Gorchakov, another army officer, has left some interesting memoirs of Pushkin at this precise time. In a Kishinev theater, he writes, "my attention was caught by a young man of short stature but quite robust and powerful, with swift and observing glance, unusually lively in his actions, often laughing with an abundance of unnecessary hilarity, and then suddenly becoming so meditative as to arouse interest. The features of his face were irregular and plain. . . ." Gorchakov was introduced to Pushkin and the next day he met him in a group of friends. They were all talking about the *Black Shawl*. Gorchakov asked him to recite it. "While repeating certain strophes in fragmentary form," continues Gorchakov, "he sud-

denly seized a rapier and began to play with it; leaping about, he took up poses, as though challenging an opponent. At that moment Druganov entered. Hardly giving him time for greetings, Pushkin offered to fence with him. Druganov refused. Pushkin insisted, and like a naughty child he began to make passes at him with the rapier. Druganov avoided the rapier with his hand. But Pushkin did not desist, and Druganov began to get angry. To avoid a quarrel I again asked Pushkin to recite the Moldavian song. He willingly agreed, threw the rapier aside, and began to recite with great spirit." 3

Despite the zest with which Pushkin threw himself into Kishinev society, he was unhappy in the town. It was not easy to forget the delightful weeks he had spent with the Raevskis. Moments of nostalgia for these friends and their ideal family existence disturbed his thoughts. Other factors contributed to a growing discontent which was at the root of the disordered life he led throughout his whole stay in Kishinev. He had scarcely been in the city two months when he availed himself of an opportunity to visit the Raevskis at Kamenka. Inzov was not loath to give him permission, for he seemed to understand thoroughly the restless and rebellious spirit of his young charge.

II

Loving thee, Raevskis and Orlov,
And Kamenka's fond memory,
I wish to say two words to thee
About myself and Kishinev.

To V. L. Davydov

By the end of November Pushkin was at Kamenka in the province of Kiev, and on the fourth of December he wrote in a gay strain to N. I. Gnedich in Petersburg: "My time is spent between aristocratic dinners and demagogic discussions. Our society, now broken up, was not long ago a varied and jolly mixture of original minds, of people well known in our Russia and curious for the unacquainted observer. There are few women, much champagne, many clever words, lots of books, and a few verses. At the present moment you will easily believe that I am little concerned with the rumors of Petersburg." 4

Kamenka, surrounded by orchards and extensive gardens, was the beautiful estate of the Davydovs. The mother of General Raevski had been married a second time to General L. D. Davydov, and the two sons of this union lived at Kamenka, the eldest with his wife, Aglaya, a pretty young woman of French birth. In the nearby city of Kiev, which Pushkin also visited on this "vacation," was the home of the Raevskis. Hence it was natural that the hospitable estate of Kamenka should have become the common meeting-ground of both families and their many mutual friends.

Life at Kamenka was as pleasant as Pushkin described it, much like the even, unbroken leisure on board an ocean liner. The central points of the day were meals and discussions, varied by reading, billiards, and occasional dances. Relatively speaking, there were "few women" present, but the attractive wife of Alexander Davydov was a legion in herself. Her husband, a retired officer and much liked by Pushkin, who compared him to Falstaff, was not especially intelligent. He possessed the sole distinction of an enormous appetite. With winning French manners Aglaya supported her boredom in "barbaric Russia" by sophisticated coquetry with the many males who visited the estate. Pushkin carried on a vigorous flirtation with her and then ungenerously dubbed her "fat Aristippus" ⁵ of a husband a "majestic cuckold," ⁶ a word which in a few years was to sear his own soul like a hot iron. In *To a Coquette* ⁷ he amusingly and not too discreetly celebrated this flirtation; and he capped the poem with an entirely ungracious epigram in which, after listing the superficial charms that had attracted Davydov's wife to certain lovers, he pointedly concludes:

Now will you tell me, my Aglaya,
How did thy husband ever win thee?⁸

Perhaps piqued by his failure with the mother, he also flirted with her twelve-year-old daughter, Adele. (This is not the only instance in which Pushkin transferred his affections from mother to daughter.) A visitor to Kamenka remonstrated with him for provoking the young girl almost to tears by his fierce grimaces across the dinner table. "I want to punish the co-

quette," he promptly replied. "At first she paid court to me, but now she pretends to be heartless and does not wish to look at me." ⁹ This curious lapse from good taste was hardly improved by his poem to Adele, in which he urges the child "to seize the hour of rapture" and "to give her youthful years to love." ¹⁰ Such strange conduct annoyed even his close friends and seriously damaged his reputation in their eyes. Of course, Pushkin also saw something of the Raevski girls at Kamenka. As in his travels with the family, nothing now occurred which would indicate that any one of the sisters was his "lost love." There is even a story that Mariya and Ekaterina treated him with some disdain during this visit.

The "original minds" and "demagogic discussions" that Pushkin wrote about no doubt provided the chief attraction for him at the estate of the Davydovs. The southwest of Russia was then an important military concentration sector. The growing revolutionary movement, which involved so many army officers, radiated out from Petersburg over the whole region. Such focal points as Tulchin, the staff headquarters of the Second Army, and Kiev were used as propaganda centers, feeding particularly the south of Russia.

Hospitable Kamenka soon became a stopping-off place for many of the prominent conspirators. V. L. Davydov himself was enmeshed in the movement. Agents on missions to the south, and interested officers from Tulchin and Kiev visited the estate. Warm political discussions were held, and quiet proselytizing for secret political societies took place. Among the guests were the well-known conspirators, I. D. Yakushkin, Okhotnikov, and the two generals, M. F. Orlov and Prince S. Volkonski, who were soon to marry Ekaterina and Mariya Raevskaya. All these men suffered for their part in the December Revolt of 1825. Perhaps the most brilliant of the company was Orlov, "the only man whom I have seen," remarked Pushkin, "who is happy by virtue of his vanity." ¹¹ He was the brother of the Orlov with whom Pushkin had already come so close to fighting a duel, and later in Kishinev Pushkin saw a good deal of the general and his bride.

Pushkin was once again thrust into the midst of political conspiracy. A tradition exists that Prince Volkonski was actually commissioned at Kamenka to enlist Pushkin in a secret society. He finally refused the task because he felt that Pushkin's service to literature was infinitely more important than anything he could do in the cause of political reform. However, there were other more realistic reasons for blackballing him. His position was not unlike that of his last year in Petersburg. He was aware of the scheming all around him, eager to take a part, but frustrated by the unwillingness of the conspirators to admit him into their circle. Like his schoolboy comrade, Pushchin, they distrusted his youthful frankness and passionate nature. The unfortunate first impression of irresponsibility which he so often made on people destroyed any incentive for confiding in him. One evening at Kamenka, to allay the suspicions of Pushkin and General Raevski, who was likewise kept in the dark, certain members of the secret Union of Welfare set up a smoke screen. They brought the conversation around to the question: Was the existence of a secret political society necessary and possible in Russia? The discussion grew heated, and Yakushkin, after emphatically arguing on the negative, dismissed the whole subject as a joke. Pushkin was much moved by this sudden turn in the conversation. He had previously expressed his belief that a secret society already existed and had declared himself as willing to join one in the interests of political and social reform. After his joking dismissal of the subject, Yakushkin describes the conclusion of the incident in his *Memoirs*. "Pushkin arose, red in the face, and said with tears in his eyes: 'I have never been so unhappy as now; I had already seen my life in the future as ennobled with a lofty purpose, yet all this was only a vile joke!'" "At that moment he was thoroughly splendid," remarks Yakushkin. Although he may have been carried away by his feelings, there is no reason to doubt Pushkin's sincerity on this occasion. Before long, circumstances obliged him to recognize the wisdom of concealing his liberalism, but that liberal sentiment burned within him is an unquestionable fact. Indeed, his mind was occupied with

some of the very reforms which the Decembrists were trying to bring about. In the fragmentary notes on Russian history¹³ which he wrote on his return to Kishinev, he declares himself for emancipation of the serfs and against the excessive privileges of the aristocracy. He has also left us the plan for an article on feudalism,¹⁴ which in intention, at any rate, indicates a serious and scholarly approach to the subject. A few months after this incident at Kamenka, Pushkin wrote *The Dagger*,¹⁵ in which he glorifies assassination as a desirable fate for tyrants. The poem, which gained wide oral dissemination, was scarcely less offensive to the government than his *Ode to Freedom*.

Political disputes and the other distractions on the estate did not divorce Pushkin entirely from his pen. On occasion he shut himself up in the billiard room and, oblivious to the knocks of servants and calls to meals, wrote for many hours at a stretch. To this period belong several fine lyrics, and it was at Kamenka that he finished *The Prisoner of the Caucasus*, penning the last line, according to tradition, while sprawled out on the billiard table.

But Pushkin had unduly protracted his visit among the Raevskis and Davydovs. After he had been away from Kishinev for about a month he had felt it necessary to have A. L. Davydov write to Inzov to explain that he had not returned because he was recovering from a severe cold. Perhaps he had been really ill, or perhaps his conscience had been bothering him. The indulgent Inzov replied to Davydov, naïvely telling of his fears that Pushkin had lost his way while traveling over the steppes in the wintry weather. "But, receiving your letter of the 15th," he concludes, "I was reassured, and I hope that your excellency will not permit him to return until he recovers his full strength."¹⁶ He had taken more than two months to "recover" his full strength, for it was the first of March before he finally returned to Kishinev.

Pushkin made one more short visit to Kamenka and Kiev in November 1822. Thereafter his connections with the Raevski family as a whole were broken off. But in his future travels he was to meet several members, and he maintained a correspond-

ence with the youngest son. His stay at Kamenka served to increase his deep devotion to this family, a touching testimony of which was his plea to Nicholas I, several years later, for aid for the Raevski children and their mother after the death of the father.

III

Kishinevian Pushkin struck a certain noble in the mug and fought a colonel with pistols, but without any bloodshed.

Letter of A. I. Turgenev, 1822

On his return to Kishinev Pushkin let loose all the devils of his nature on this Bessarabian "Sodom." It was more than mere youth or a proud insistence upon his individuality that inspired such behavior. A certain purposefulness appeared to dictate his actions, and the terrific energy he threw into dissipation seemed born of despair. Enemies, and some friends, set it all down as a pose.

In the morning, lying naked in bed, Pushkin traced patterns on the walls of his room by shooting wax bullets with a pistol. At meals he delighted in confounding the pious Inzov by asking sacrilegious questions. Leaving the house early, he sometimes failed to return at night. In all social events he was an inevitable participator, and these failing, he engineered his own entertainment. Wherever there was a gathering, there was Pushkin. When he appeared in the public gardens the natives turned out to see him, dressed as a Turk, a Serb, a Jew, a Greek, or a Moldavian, always swinging a heavy iron cane which he carried in order to strengthen his trigger-hand. Perhaps extreme poverty had something to do with these masquerades, for he could hardly afford to dress in the best Russian style. For a time the government had forgotten his meager "salary" of seven hundred rubles. He asked his father for money; Sergei Lvovich offered clothes instead, which his son scorned. Inzov was finally obliged to declare his poverty to the government, and the usual allowance was renewed. Then the gaming table often claimed this pittance. The gambling habit, acquired in the Lyceum and nourished in Petersburg, became a passion in

Kishinev. Pushkin, like Dostoevski, always seemed to lose, but the hope of a "killing" soon brought him back to the green table. He had a reputation for bad luck and unintelligence at cards.

There was no end to his childish pranks and witticisms. A local beauty asked him to write some verses in her album. He willingly obliged, extolled her charms, and then wrote at the end of the poem, "April 1." At a party he observed that a young lady, whose feet hurt, had secretly removed and hidden her shoes under the divan. Pushkin filched them, and the embarrassed woman had to walk to the door in her stocking feet before he relented. He taught Inzov's parrot a Moldavian oath. When a native priest talked to the bird the parrot repeated its profanity with a loud guffaw. In church, behind Inzov's back, he made faces at the girls and thumbed his nose. And at a divine service, prompted by a happy motif on the organ, he invited a young lady next to him to dance a mazurka. She fled, thinking him mad. In general, irreverence was characteristic of his attitude during this period. For making a joking remark about the Bible in the presence of the rector of the local seminary he was threatened with a summons from the Holy Synod. Pushkin loved dancing, music, and gypsy songs. Walking hatless about the town — he had pawned his hat for wine — he did not hesitate to take part in a dance with native street performers.

Pushkin had a contempt for Moldavians and Greeks, and they soon learned to fear him. For the most part they regarded him as a young madcap who possessed special privileges beyond their understanding. From experience they soon became aware of his irritable temperament and took care to flatter rather than provoke him. The wives of these local nobles, only recently released from semi-Oriental seclusion, made a hero of Pushkin, surrounding him with a mysterious demonic glamour. They were proud of being courted by "Pushka," as they called him, a son of a Russian nobleman. With some of the natives he became very friendly. Of little Khudobashev, a long-nosed Armenian, he made an idol, searching him out in every company and

playfully throwing him down on a divan and sitting on him (an expression of friendship not unusual with Pushkin).

But he was easily offended, both by natives and his own countrymen, and they in turn thought him a born trouble-maker. Often his pride and ambition knew no limits; whatever the company was doing, he wanted to be first. In a discussion about books a Greek expressed surprise that Pushkin did not know a certain work. Indignant, he at once challenged the surprised Greek to a duel. He shoved a pear in the face of another unfortunate native; and in a dispute over a card game he took off his shoe and struck a Moldavian in the face. For this Inzov sent him packing to Izmail for a brief spell. At dinner he impertinently doubted the drinking prowess of an old guest at Inzov's. The venerable drinker sarcastically called him a "milk-fed boy"; Pushkin retaliated by dubbing him a "wine-fed man." The guest wished to challenge, but Inzov made peace between them.

A quarrel with an important Moldavian merchant by the name of Balsh became the talk of the town. Pushkin courted his young wife, who spoke excellent French, and ended by flirting with her thirteen-year-old daughter. The mother grew vexed, either because of the attention he paid her daughter or because he ceased to give her any. In a caustic exchange Pushkin joked about the courage of Moldavians, and Mme. Balsh in turn sneered at his own courage. Piqued, Pushkin went directly to the card table where her husband was playing and challenged him to a duel. Naturally mystified, Balsh sought an explanation from his wife, who told him that Pushkin had been offensive. Turning to Pushkin he asked: "Why do you demand satisfaction from me when you have allowed yourself to offend my wife?"¹⁷ This was said in such a loud and angry voice that Pushkin lost his temper. He seized a candlestick and brandished it over Balsh's head, but a friend caught his arm. To prevent a duel Balsh was persuaded next day to apologize. "They have asked me to beg your pardon," he began. "What sort of a pardon do you want?"¹⁸ Without saying a word Pushkin slapped his face and left the room.

The duel, however, did not take place. Inzov put Pushkin under arrest for two weeks, confining him to his room. This was the good general's customary military form of punishment for Pushkin's misconduct. As an extra precaution he sometimes deprived him of his boots. Then the patient old man would worry and inquire after his health and send him the latest issue of a Petersburg journal. These confinements were intended to avoid disagreeable consequences rather than to punish him. Indeed, there was no end to Inzov's kindness. He provided him with lodgings, food, money, and even clothes, and in return Pushkin helped to enliven the old bachelor's isolation by his clever, jolly conversation. They had a sincere affection for each other. "General Inzov," he wrote, "is a good and honored man, a Russian at heart. . . . He puts his trust in nobility of feeling because he himself has noble feelings."¹⁹ Ingratitude was not one of Pushkin's vices, and he never failed to speak of Inzov with a kind of filial devotion.

Pushkin did not always escape the consequences of his bold behavior in Kishinev. Nor did he want to escape them. If anything, he courted danger during this period. He delighted in hearing about brave deeds, and like several poets of his temperament — Byron, for example — he would rather perform heroic acts than write about them. This is one reason why some of his friends felt that he was created for an army career. The light-hearted attitude toward the danger of duels which seemed to characterize him in Petersburg had now changed to the attitude of the fatalist. Life "staked on a card," as it were, was part of his new pose. Pushkin valued courage as one of the highest of virtues, something that was a necessary part of his great pride and of his Russian nobility. And it must be said that in the face of danger, when a man reveals himself fully, Pushkin possessed every fine quality of bravery. Before the barrier his passionate nature grew cold as ice. At that fatal moment, as one of his Kishinev comrades remarked, "it seemed that he was smiling satirically while looking into the muzzle, as though he were thinking up an evil epigram on the marksman or on a miss."²⁰

To be sure, there was relatively little danger in offending

timid Moldavians, but Pushkin did not hesitate to treat his countrymen, who were often as nice about a point of honor as he, to the same brand of daring. His sharp language frequently ran counter to the army etiquette of officer-friends, and his quick temper was continually plunging him into difficulties.

Once at a card game he lost steadily to Zubov, an officer of the general staff. Pushkin implied that Zubov cheated. A challenge resulted. The duel took place in a field outside the city limits. According to the testimony of many, Pushkin appeared with some cherries in his hand and calmly ate then while his opponent took aim. Zubov shot and missed. "Are you satisfied?" asked Pushkin before he fired. Instead of demanding that he shoot, Zubov ran to embrace his cool enemy. "This is entirely superfluous,"²¹ remarked Pushkin, and refusing to take his shot, he left the field. The news of his behavior at this duel quickly spread through the town and added to his growing reputation. Inzov, however, could not overlook the affair. "The Kishinev air has a bad effect on me," Pushkin waggishly told one of his friends. "On the advice of my old doctor" — so Pushkin called General Inzov — "it is necessary for me to spend some time further south."²²

Shortly after his return he got into another scrape, and this time with a much more formidable opponent. At a dance in the casino one evening a young officer of the Egerski regiment requested the orchestra leader to play a quadrille. Pushkin had previously asked for a mazurka. The leader, who knew him well, ordered the mazurka. The commander of the regiment, Colonel S. N. Starov, renowned in the army for his bravery, suggested to the young officer that he demand an apology. The timid youth argued that he was not acquainted with Pushkin, and the colonel at once took upon himself the obligation. A challenge quickly followed.

The duel was fought next morning in a blizzard. The opponents could hardly see each other. They each shot twice and missed, the distance having been shortened for the second try. Because of the intense cold it was difficult to load the pistols, and although both wished to continue, the seconds insisted that

the duel be called off until more favorable conditions were available. On his way back to town Pushkin visited a friend, and not finding him at home he scribbled the following impromptu:

I live;
Starov
Is well;
The duel is not ended.²³

Fortunately, before another meeting could take place, common friends managed to compose their differences. At the usual meal of reconciliation Pushkin said to Starov:

"I always respected you, Colonel, and therefore I accepted your challenge."

"And you did well, Alexander Sergeevich," replied Starov. "To tell the truth, you stand up under bullets as well as you write."²⁴

The vanity of art and the vanity of courage were glorified in one stroke. Such a tribute from a brave man and a hero of the war of 1812 threw Pushkin into ecstasies. He embraced the colonel and never ceased to hold him in great esteem.

A new and vaster outlet for heroics was at hand. The dogs of war were about to be unleashed. At the beginning of 1821 Bessarabia was aflame with the spirit of the Greek revolt. All the classic catchwords were in the air — the "freedom of ancient Greece"; "Christians against Turks"; "the salvation of the cradle of civilization." Rumors flew. The tsar would declare for the rebels. His dream of ending the European power of the Turks was about to be realized. Had he not concentrated an army in Bessarabia for this purpose? The population of Kishinev was swollen by Greek refugees from Turkish atrocities. Patriotic Greeks were roaming the streets of Kishinev and Odessa, buying up every conceivable weapon. The Ypsilanti brothers appeared in Kishinev; and finally in March 1821, under the leadership of Alexander Ypsilanti, the standard of revolt was unfurled. The Greek rebels moved on the Turkish frontier.

Pushkin, like Byron two years later, was caught up in the excitement of the movement. The noble cause of Greek independence stirred his imagination. If Russia went in he would have his chance to strut in a uniform and engage in warlike

deeds. He had written to S. I. Turgenev in Petersburg about the possibility of his being recalled. "But," he added, "if there is any hope of war, for Christ's sake, leave me in Bessarabia!"²⁵ The rumor even got around among his friends in the capital that he had run off to join the rebels. In his Kishinev diary he jotted down: "I am firmly convinced that Greece will triumph and that 25,000,000 Turks will surrender the flowering land of Hellas to the lawful heirs of Homer and Themistocles."²⁶ And like many of the sympathizers, he subscribed to the journal of the revolutionists. The muse provided him with a vicarious outlet for his mounting enthusiasm. In *War*, with an unintentional touch of the mock-heroic, he imagines the resounding din of clashing armies:

Blood I behold; I see the feast of vengeance;
The fatal bullets whistle about my head!²⁷

And in *Arise, O Greece, Arise!* amid a star-cluster of classical names and allusions, he calls upon this "country of heroes and of gods"²⁸ to break the chains of slaves.

Meanwhile, the cause of the rebels went badly. For a time the infidel Turk had the situation well in hand. The cautious Alexander I submitted to the dictates of international diplomacy, and the Russian armies confined their efforts to protecting their own frontier. The revolutionists under Ypsilanti were defeated, and he himself lost caste among his followers. The mercenary motives of some of the Greek leaders were becoming more and more evident. Often the soldier-patriots took on the aspect of bands of brigands. The fundamental common sense of Pushkin began to assert itself, and his enthusiasm eventually turned into indifference. He observed the absence of sincere patriotism among the Greeks, and in the end he was not above ridiculing the whole movement. Concerning the bungling tactics of the rebels, he wrote to A. I. Turgenev: "In our Bessarabia there is no lack of impressions. Here there is such a mess that it is worse than an oaten kissel."²⁹ Three years later, completely disillusioned, he could deliver himself of the following to Vyazemski: "Greece has polluted me. . . . The Jesuits have stuffed us about Themistocles and Pericles, and we imagine

that these filthy peoples, made up of brigands and shopkeepers, are their legitimate descendants and the inheritors of their school glory. You say that I have changed my opinion. If you should visit us in Odessa and gaze upon these compatriots of Miltiades, then you would agree with me." ³⁰ The glory of combat and doughty deeds appealed to Pushkin, but he had no desire to die of a fever in the malarial flats of Missolonghi. He was wiser than Byron.

IV

For long was pleasure strange to me;
The very name gives new delight,
But secret sadness of despite
I fear; all that's sweet, false may be.
To a Greek Girl

Exotic women of a variety of nationalities created an atmosphere of love-intrigue well calculated to appeal to Pushkin's cynical disposition at this time. In the course of his sojourn in Bessarabia he had many affairs, no doubt many more than we know about. But they were nearly all transient loves or flirtations with Greeks, Moldavians, Jewesses, and gypsies, characterized more by an ethnological curiosity than by any sincere passion. Gorchakov tells how Pushkin would come to him with a confession of some new conquest. "What a beauty! I cannot live without her!" he would exclaim. "But on the morrow," Gorchakov adds, "another took the place of this beauty." ³¹ Once he saw a pretty face at a window, and he spurred his horse up on the sidewalk to pay his addresses. The girl fainted, and her parents protested to Inzov. The punishment for this prank was two days' confinement without his shoes. In fact, his persistent and often unique courting of Moldavian women resulted in complaints to Inzov by irate parents or husbands. He had little respect for the husbands of these native wives, and he jokingly dismissed them as:

Their husbands with horns,
Both shaved and bearded.³²

It was Inzov's custom to invite the aggrieved parties to state their case in Pushkin's presence. And the typical punishment that invariably followed gave young Moldavian daredevils